

## His One And Only

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## His One And Only

by [coudric](#)

### Summary

[“The only thing you missed out on,” Utahime-sensei hissed into the palm that she was wiping over her face in agitation, “is the absolute disaster that was Getō and your idiot teacher. But it looks like you might get a crash course on that!”]

Or: Getō has reclaimed his body (for the most part), Gojō's clingy and weirdly vulnerable and the kids cannot stand Getō's guts. The sentiment may or may not be returned.

### Notes

I actually can't believe that I'm doing a multi-chaptered fic right now, lol. But it's basically still Gojo's birthday and what better gift than to return Geto to him :p My aim is to keep this 'short' though (maybe 5 chapters), so let's see how that goes ~~probably terribly~~.

This is basically: 'Geto's back and Gojo's clingy ~~while his kids plot murder :))~~' sprinkled with some angst, some fluff and let's see what else. I might tinker with this chapter more later on since I'm not 100% satisfied but I wanted to get it out because I already rewrote it once and have been sitting on the editing bit for too long.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# Discomfort.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Getō Suguru's dragon was huddled in front of the stone staircase that led up to the infirmary ward as if he belonged here.

Everything about this image was wrong - ranging from the beast itself, its massive head lazily lowered to the ground and steam drifting out of its mouth with each breath, to its master whom it was coiled around like a snake, protective and intimidating at once. Megumi's attention, though, despite the vicious rage sizzling through him at the sight of *this man*, zeroed in on one specific thing and everything else fizzled out of his focus, reduced to nothing but bleary shapes in front of him.

Considering *what* he was, it was ironic but Megumi had only once experienced terror strong enough to rattle him to his core and its remnants etched so deeply into his very being that he could sometimes still sense their phantom fingers reaching for him: when Tsumiki had been cursed and refused to wake up no matter how much Megumi had pleaded with her to.

Until this day, he could vividly recollect: how the world around him had stilled, blotches of black and white creeping into the edges of his vision. How every noise around him had turned into static between his ears, rattling his brain unbearably. How his heartbeats had grown steadily louder and louder until they had filled up his lungs, crowding out his breaths, and pulsated in his throat, spasming and clawing, intent on making him gag his heart out.

He had never expected to feel anything remotely close to that again. And yet.

Looking at Gojō-sensei now- *Invincible*, he had come to believe. *Untouchable. Unreachable. That* Gojō-sensei, bloody and unmoving in *Getō Suguru's* arms-

In the back of his fuzzy mind, Megumi noticed other details such as the missing uniform jacket. Or the white t-shirt drenched crimson red as if someone had taken a bucket full of blood and blindly thrown it at a blank canvas despite the canvas not being large enough to encompass an actual pattern. Or sensei's usually white hair seeming ashen with a dirty reddish sheen to it, perhaps from the light of dusk or perhaps from soot, dirt and blood. Or how there was a cut on his lower lip, his whole chin smeared with dark red and the back of the hand that was hanging limply at his side, knuckles grazing the ground, was littered with angry blisters.

Megumi *saw* but the details swam in front of his eyes, turning blurry and unrecognizable, until all that remained was a mass of red. So much red.

He had known Gojō-sensei for most of his life and had never seen as much as a scratch on the man. It was unfathomable. Ridiculous! *No-*

Gojō-sensei's blistered hand twitched, peeking out startlingly clear from the otherwise fuzzy blob, its motion so sudden and violent that it jostled the world around Megumi back into motion. He hadn't even fully processed it when he had already summoned Nue and rushed forward on pure instinct, his shikigami's screeches blending seamlessly into the static in his head and his pulse hurtling under the nerves dancing frenziedly over each beat.

The dragon growled, a low, warning rumble, but didn't twitch otherwise.

Nue's lightning froze inches before cracking against the side of Getō's head. It sizzled angrily for several moments before fizzling out.

Megumi, arms still raised and legs bent, came to an abrupt halt, stunned. From behind Getō, the sharp strike of Okkotsu-senpai's katana – when had he moved? – similarly stopped within a hair's breadth of touching the dragon's neck. Okkotsu-senpai jumped back, bewildered.

It took Megumi a split second longer than it should have to put two and two together. And once he did, the sudden realization settled heavily between his guts; a block of hard ice freezing his joints and rendering his limbs completely immobile. Dread stirred in the pit of his stomach, nothing more than a faint simmering in contrast to the ice at first that steadily rose until it turned into bile bubbling in the back of his throat.

*Infinity.*

Gojō-sensei's infinity was protecting Getō. The man who had sealed him. Who had rained chaos upon Japan. Who had *turned Tsumiki into a puppet for his* -

He pursed his lips, confusion intermingling with anger and a misplaced sense of bitter betrayal deep within him. This didn't make any sense! Why would Infinity cover Getō? Despite Gojō-sensei being unconscious? Even if he weren't, why would he protect Getō Suguru, or Kenjaku or Kamo Noritoshi or whoever this was wearing Getō's body, like this? And from *them*, nonetheless? The only times sensei used his ability on Megumi was during training.

Suddenly, Getō raised his gaze and fixated it directly at Megumi. Unimpressed. Nonchalant. But there was something else in those bottomless depths, something sharp and chilling that had his hackles raised in alarm and almost made him flinch back in shock.

Megumi inhaled the frosty evening air and let it blow over his flaring nerves, hoping to clear the fog that was persistently shrouding his senses and get a better grip of himself. He shouldn't have rushed into this so thoughtlessly. When had he started to act first and think later?

Then, he took in the man in front of him more carefully. The guy was crumpled against his cursed spirit and was clutching Gojō-sensei against his chest, the lower part of his face buried in dirty white hair. The upper half of his gesa was completely torn off and all that remained from his undershirt were shreds hanging off his shoulders, otherwise leaving his upper body - covered in scratches - bare. Strands of black hair were fluttering wildly in the wind, making it difficult to get a clear view of the rest of his face but there were cuts and blood smeared all over it.

Honestly, he looked terrible.

Why was he here and in such a condition? With Gojō-sensei clearly *not* sealed anymore? Just hours ago, when they had almost gotten their hands on the *Prison Realm* after tracking down Getō for over a month, the man had, in the ensuing chaos of battle, slipped through their fingers - much to everyone's frustration. And now, he broke onto school grounds just like that? Was he *mocking* them?

What the hell was going on here?!

“Hey!” Itadori cut through the static still blaring in Megumi's ears. He was so close that the vibrations of his voice shot through Megumi's body, sending his pulse spiraling. He had completely forgotten that there were other people present. “What did you do to Gojō-sensei?”

Megumi didn't want to risk looking away but... It wasn't noticeable under the volume and yet, Megumi could pick out notes of panic underlying Itadori's words. They wound themselves around his own throat in a vice-like grip, squeezing until it hurt.

Getō's gaze wandered from Megumi to Itadori next to him, lingering for several beats, unseeing, before he took in his surroundings as if noticing them for the first time.

On the staircase leading up to the infirmary ward, Okkotsu-senpai was observing both, curse and its master, intently, katana still raised to strike. His cursed energy was so condensed and full of resentment that Megumi could feel its chill creeping under his own skin even through this distance. Behind himself, Megumi could hear rapidly approaching steps - Kugisaki and Utahime-sensei, most likely. Getō was outnumbered while injured while they were driven by determination not to fail a third time.

Yet, Getō seemed so utterly unbothered. As if they weren't worth worrying about.

Megumi grit his teeth, annoyed. The audacity.

"Oi!" Itadori tried again, taking a step forward, but Getō had already found something else to focus on.

His head swivelled to the side and whatever was visible of his feature lit up. His lips curved into a sheepish smile that was such a stark contrast to how his nonchalant aura turned sharper and the tension in the air grew suffocatingly thick. Megumi followed his gaze and landed on Ieiri-san leisurely approaching them from the opposite direction of where they had come from.

"*Shōko!*" Getō greeted her in delight. The familiarity in his tone was so unexpected that Megumi dropped his arms in surprise and lost hold of his stance.

Ieiri-san paused for a second, one eyebrow raised ever so slightly, before she huffed in amusement, exhaling a puff of smoke in the process. "You know, I hate it when your pets loiter."

"Yeah, yeah, of course." With a absent-minded flick of Getō's wrist, the dragon was gone, leaving wisps of black shadows behind that came off Getō and Gojō-sensei's bodies like steam.

A sharp tug to the hem of his jacket startled Megumi out of his confused daze. When he glanced over toward Itadori, he was met with a silent question. *What the hell is going on?* He shrugged cluelessly, the motion stiff as his frustration seeped into it.

Unlike them, Utahime-sensei wasn't stunned enough to just watch. She didn't move any closer, stood shoulder to shoulder next to Megumi and pointed an accusing finger at Getō. Nobara ventured a step ahead of them, hammer clutched in one hand but not raised and her eyepatch was facing Megumi, so he couldn't tell what she might be thinking.

"Shokō," Utahime-sensei hissed, "what are you doing?!"

"It's fine," Ieiri-san mumbled around her cigarette, unperturbed. She crouched down in front of Getō and reached out for Gojō-sensei. Infinity didn't stop her - and Megumi wasn't sure what to think of that. "He's the real deal."

Megumi frowned. The real deal... meaning the *original* Getō Suguru? How could she tell with such confidence? Was that even possible? He didn't fully understand the situation, but that body was already dead as far as he was aware. An empty shell being paraded around by someone else. How would you come back from *death* ? Especially with your brain missing?

“As if that makes it any *better*,” Utahime-sensei sneered.

Ieiri-san, with her knuckles pressed against Gojō-sensei’s forehead and the fore- and middle finger of her other hand pressed against the side of his throat, hummed in agreement. “Probably not.”

Megumi squinted at Getō suspiciously when he didn’t attack Ieiri-san and also failed to react to the conversation. The man wasn’t paying anyone any attention. He wasn’t even watching Ieiri-san – his whole focus was fixated on Gojō-sensei’s face, expression half-hidden by shadows and behind his ridiculously long hair. Yet, although Megumi was unable to make out what kind of expression Getō was sporting, he felt something tight and uncomfortable coil in his guts.

The way Getō was focused on Gojō-sensei... It made Megumi uncomfortable.

*What* was going on here?

“This is- Shōk-”

“He’s running hot,” Ieiri-san cut off Utahime-sensei. “*Way* too hot. And his cursed energy is all over the place.” She got back on her feet, white scrubs billowing behind her and lips forming a thin, troubled line. “The injuries seem superficial enough but... Let’s get him inside, first.”

It seemed like Getō was about to move but a blade under his chin halted him in his motions. Okkotsu-senpai stared from Ieiri-san to Getō, mouth twisted into an angry snarl that was so unlike him. “And what about him? Are we *trusting* him?”

Getō eyed the katana with disdain rather than concern but didn’t attempt to defend himself. Megumi’s hands curled into fists at his side.

“He brought Gojō to me,” Ieiri-san said drily. As loath as Megumi was to admit it, she had a point. Someone as cunning as the guy in Shibuya would have never made a mistake like this. “We can discuss what to do with him after I treat Gojō,” she added more placatingly and, to emphasize her words, tapped a nail against the katana in expectation.

Okkotsu-senpai hesitated for several moments, expression conflicted and unwilling, before he sighed and jerkily withdrew the weapon. There was a visible, red line on Getō’s throat right over his Adam’s apple.

Getō heaved himself up on shaky legs, arms clearly struggling to carry the extra weight even if nothing of that was visible on his unphased face. When Okkotsu-senpai made to take Gojō-senpai from him, he jerked back, grip around sensei tightening until his knuckles stood out white.

“I *can*,” he said icily.

For a split second, Megumi was sure that Okkotsu-senpai would cut him down then and there. He certainly looked tempted – and wasn’t that a strange sight? Of course, Megumi was aware of what had happened last year and how senpai had been targeted by Getō. But it was still unsettling seeing the otherwise kind and gentle boy simmering in so much resentment. Not that Megumi couldn’t understand, though.

Next to Megumi, Utahime-sensei groaned in disgust. “Some things never change, huh?”

As Ieiri-san led them up the stairs, Okkotsu-senpai following on their heels, Kugisaki turned around, nose scrunched up in bewilderment. “I feel like I missed something. Did I miss something?”

“The only thing you missed out on,” Utahime-sensei hissed into the palm that she was wiping over her face in agitation, “is the absolute disaster that was Getō and your idiot teacher. But it looks like you might get a crash course on that!”

Megumi shared a dubious look with the other two. He *had* assumed that Gojō-sensei knew Getō considering that they might have clashed in the past; it came with being on opposite sides, didn’t it? But did they actually know each other rather well? Ieiri-san was familiar enough with Getō to determine that they were dealing with the original right now. And the fury that Utahime-sensei was radiating was laced with venom more than the frustration she always harbored for Gojō-sensei; it seemed personal.

There were few things Megumi knew about Getō Suguru: The man was a former Special Grade sorcerer turned curse user. He had killed countless non-sorcerers. Last year, he had led the Night Parade of One Hundred Demons in an attempt to kill Okkotsu-senpai.

But clearly, there was an important piece of information that Megumi was missing.

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Ieiri-san didn’t protest when they crowded the infirmary without permission. She didn’t even acknowledge them beyond a furtive, unimpressed glance before focusing her attention fully on Gojō-sensei.

Megumi stayed next to the door, leaning sideways against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest and his right foot tapping incessantly against the floor. Itadori was crouching on the other side of the door frame with Kugisaki sitting in front of him, her back pressed against his knees. Okkotsu-senpai was walking up and down behind Ieiri-san, one hand still clutching his sheathed katana while his other arm was wound awkwardly around his torso.

Outside, low murmurs filled the hall and Megumi wondered who had joined Utahime-sensei. The Zen’in twins, Miwa and Inumaki-senpai had been recuperating in the adjacent rooms, so perhaps the commotion had alerted them.

Megumi couldn’t bring himself to watch Ieiri-san work even if all she was doing was checking vitals and cleaning off some blood. His stomach had churned queasily when he had tried, a stubborn unwillingness settled between his bones that denied him to stare at Gojō-sensei in such a state. It didn’t seem right to him. Instead, he observed Getō who was sitting on the floor next to the headboard of the sickbed. Gojō-sensei’s right hand, the one unhurt, was hanging over the edge and Getō was nudging his own fingers against it like a cat playing with a colorful worm on a string.

He grimaced at the sight. Megumi had met people who had known Gojō-sensei for years and while most were exasperated with him and some respected him begrudgingly, no one acted like *this* around him. This... intimately and forward. It made his skin itch with discomfort and the cold stone of flickering resentment in his stomach twist sickeningly.

“Did you two fight?” Ieiri-san asked as she was bandaging sensei’s blistered hand, breaking the charged silence.

Getō didn’t look up, only rolled his head sideways so that it was resting lazily against his left shoulder. “Na. The other guy did.”

Ieiri-san nodded as if she had expected that. “Most of the blood isn’t his own. But I must admit that

I'm not too sure what's up with his cursed energy." There was a crease digging between her eyebrows, indicating frustration - it didn't help the restlessness gnawing at him. Had Ieiri-san ever been frustrated by anything? Tired, yes, but she always knew what she was doing. "The flow is irregular and it seems to fluctuate heavily between strong outbursts and receding completely. Maybe residuals of the Prison Realm?"

"Prison Realm does cut off a person's cursed energy," Getō said thoughtfully. His hand had stilled and the tips of his fingers were lightly resting against Gojō-sensei's. "No wonder. Imagine my surprise when *that guy* actually drew blood!" Honestly, Megumi didn't know how someone could sound so morbidly amused *and* infuriated at the same time, but it grated on his already frenzied nerves.

Ieiri-san stepped back from the bed and took her cigarette out, snorting in amusement. "So, what - seeing him get hurt dragged you out of the grave? Creepy."

Getō hummed. "Can't dispute that."

Megumi loosened his jaw once he noticed that he was gritting his teeth too hard and inhaled shakily. The air was stuffy and the tension lingering within it prickled down his throat irritatingly. He was already on edge and their weird banter was only agitating him more.

"You want a check-up too?" Ieiri-san inquired like an afterthought.

This time, Getō did lift his gaze to meet hers. His mouth was stretched into a humorless smile. "What, not going to lock me up right away?"

"Yaga *will* want to see you," Ieiri-san conceded, unapologetic. "Just thought that I'd make sure you're not gonna pass out on us."

With a quiet, exasperated sigh Getō heaved himself to his feet, much steadier now without the extra weight. His upper body was still bare, though. Itadori and Kugisaki stood up as well, tense and alert.

"I've had worse," Getō said with a pointed look toward Okkotsu-senpai who returned it with a sharp glare. "Let's chat, I guess."

He barely took three steps before freezing in surprise.

Curiously, Megumi pushed himself away from the wall and walked closer, peering past the guy – and felt his breath hitch.

Gojō-sensei's fingers were wrapped around Getō's wrist, not tightly but his blunt nails were digging into flesh. His eyes weren't fully open, he was struggling to blink, but they were focused on Getō nonetheless as he turned on his side and pulled up his knees closer to his chest, curling up. "...don't."

Getō's surprise morphed into something more sombre – *sadder*. There was no other description for the sharp downturn of his lips and the resigned lowering of his chin, the way he let his hair curtain his expression or how he hesitantly turned his palm upward to wound his fingers around Gojō-sensei's.

"*Honestly*," he huffed quietly, disbelievingly.

Megumi turned away from them with his heart in his throat and stomach in knots. Gojō-sensei being so vulnerable... It felt like impudence to see him like this. Wrong. *Invasive*.

He wasn't the only one feeling like this, though. Okkotsu-senpai was pointedly staring at the closed door, mouth pulled into a stiff grimace. Kugisaki and Itadori were exaggeratedly looking at everything but the two men although he caught Itadori peeking repeatedly, expression troubled. Ieiri-san was already moving to leave and waved for them to follow her, apparently unperturbed by this turn of the events.

"I'll be back in the morning for a second check-up," she said. "I want to see if some rest will help him. I'll also bring some clothes," she added.

"Is it really okay to leave him with sensei?" Itadori murmured, gaze flickering from Ieiri-san to Megumi, uncertain.

Ieiri-san smiled at them. "Don't worry about it. Trust me."

When Megumi chanced a furtive glance back, Getō had climbed into the bed, elbow propped up over sensei's head and face resting on his palm while he peered down, features smooth and gentle. Gojō-sensei's flushed face was pressed into his chest and his fingers still entwined with the other man's.

Megumi hurried out, legs trembling and chest tight enough to hurt.

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"Why are you so nonchalant about this?" Megumi winced at the hoarseness of his voice. When Ieiri-san didn't reply immediately, he added, "Even if he's the real one, he's still a wanted criminal, isn't he?"

Ieiri-san turned around to face them, hands in her pockets and cigarette back between her lips. "Sure is. To the world, at least." The corners of her mouth crooked up into an empty smile. "To me? An old classmate." *Oh*. "And to Satoru..." She trailed off with a thoughtful hum, her gaze wandering over all of them one after another in contemplation.

Utahime-sensei, who was sitting on one of the many chairs lined up along the walls with Miwa and Mai-senpai on either side of her, rolled her eyes behind Ieiri-san's back. "A leash, sometimes. A terrible enabler, mostly."

"That's a way to put it," Ieiri-san chuckled. Then, she raised a finger toward them. "Wait here, I'll be right back."

Once the clicking of her heels filled the hallway, Maki-senpai took her place, bandaged arms crossed over her chest and eyebrows furrowed in question. He tried not to linger on the burn scars spread over her face. "What is going on?"

"Is Satoru really back? Just like that?" Panda-senpai asked.

Kugisaki on Megumi's right sighed and stretched her arms, almost hitting Megumi. "Yup! Back and cuddling with the enemy!"

Maki-senpai grimaced in disgust while Miwa's suppressed gasp echoed too loudly within these walls. "What?!"

"He's hurt," Okkotsu-senpai piped up meekly from where he was sitting next to the closed door,



katana splayed over his thighs and left forearm pressed against Inumaki-senpai's right one. "Maybe he's just not aware of what he's doing?"

"*Hurt?*" Maki-senpai repeated in disbelief. "That man doesn't get hurt!" Quieter, with more uncertainty creeping between her words, she added, "And if he *is* hurt, why the hell are we leaving him alone with a dangerous criminal?!"

Megumi almost jumped when, without warning, Itadori leaned into him and pressed his forehead against his shoulder blade, huffing out a deep, exhausted sigh against Megumi's uniform. He forced his muscles to loosen as much as possible and stayed perfectly still, trying hard to ignore the warmth stirring in his blood and thawing at the ice that had steadily spread through him ever since finding Getō with Gojō-sensei earlier.

They were all tired and strung up high on nerves. But they probably wouldn't find any rest until Gojō-sensei woke up properly. It was odd. They had been trying so hard to find the *Prison Realm* and unseal sensei, and now that Gojō-sensei *was* free and here... There was no relief to be found in that, yet. Especially not with him clinging to that guy - real or not, he was wearing the face that the imposter had used to cause all that damage. To use Tsumiki like this. Megumi wasn't sure how to feel about any of this.

When Ieiri-san returned with something clutched in her right hand, her cigarette was gone. Surprisingly enough, she held it out for Megumi to take. "Here. Have a look."

It was a photo, an old one judging from the yellowed edges. Megumi took it gingerly as Itadori peered from over his shoulder while Kugisaki leaned into his side.

There were two boys depicted. Gojō-sensei looked ridiculous with his face smeared in what Megumi assumed was cake. He had a piece in his mouth, grinning widely around it, and was leaning over a table cluttered with various foods, his exposed eyes gleaming full of mischief. Getō on the other side of the small table, wearing his hair in a topknot, was also leaning in, smiling softly.

It seemed as if they were going to share that piece of cake. Or kiss.

He stared, stunned.

"Gross," Maki-senpai said, disgusted.

Megumi blinked in surprise, only now realizing that the others, even Miwa and Mai-senpai, had huddled around him to look.

"I think it's cute," Miwa said quietly.

"Gojō-sensei looks kinda different, doesn't he?" Itadori murmured into Megumi's shoulder, voice muffled.

He did. Not in the sense that he was younger - the man still resembled a teenager despite pushing his thirties - but... in this photo, he appeared *genuine*. He was radiating sincere happiness that was such a stark contrast to the exaggerated display he always showcased around everyone.

"They were known as *The Strongest*," Ieiri-san explained from outside of their huddle. Maybe Megumi was imagining the wistfulness in her tone... "Always attached at the hip. The perfect partnership. At the end of our first year, they were already Special Grades."

Somehow, Megumi hadn't even considered that Getō might have attended a jujutsu school. Which,

in hindsight, *stupid*. But if they had been as close as Ieiri-san was implying, how come Megumi had never heard of Getō in this context before? Sure, Gojō-sensei didn't talk that much about himself on a personal level, surprisingly enough, but certain topics did come up between them. So, why not this?

"If you ask Gojō, he won't tell you, of course," Ieiri-san continued, now full of mirth. "But Getō has always been the one and only for him."

"*Romantically?*" Megumi burst out, shocked and too high-pitched, and immediately clamped his mouth shut in embarrassment. Over Kugisaki's head, he saw Okkotsu-senpai wince.

Ieiri-san chuckled. "Yeah. They were disgustingly in love."

"The worst thing to ever happen to us," Utahime-sensei grumbled somewhere in the back. It lacked her earlier heat.

Itadori turned his face to the side, probably to see Ieiri-san better, his warm breath fanning over Megumi's throat distractingly. "If they were in love, why did Getō..." He made some vague gestures.

Ieiri-san shrugged. "Things happened, most of them out of their control. It's not really my place to tell you about that. But what I'm trying to say is - Getō's not a threat to Gojō."

"Physically, at least," Utahime-sensei chimed in once again. "He's definitely a threat to all of our mental health. And I can't believe you still have photos, Shōko!"

"Well, I'm not completely heartless," Ieiri-san smiled with a glance back at her.

Megumi blended out whatever else they might have said, his thoughts drifting back to how *Infinity* had subconsciously protected Getō from him and Okkotsu-senpai. How sensei had *clung* to him and curled into him as if scared that the man might disappear otherwise. Or how Getō had refused to let Okkotsu-senpai carry Gojō-sensei and hadn't left his side - his personal space - even once.

It was beyond unsettling and Megumi decided that he didn't like this. Not one bit.

## Chapter End Notes

Megumi, for probably the first time in his life: \*shows\* concern for Gojo.  
Gojo, unconscious: Ha, ha, ha. Nope.

Hope some of you enjoyed this! I can't promise regular updates but - until next chapter :p

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

Second chapter! I was trying to get it done yesterday but today's fine too; take it as a Christmas present :p On that note, I. Am. Astounded. I didn't expect such a huge response to this story and honestly, I am not sure what to say except: thank you and I hope that you will keep enjoying this :)

More notes at the end, please check them out!

Btw, if I haven't replied to someone's review (yet), I'm in the middle of catching up with that - I apologize that it took me so long, I can be terrible like that sometimes T\_T

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the time that the first tentative rays of the rising sun started to bathe the infirmary in a cozy warm light, Suguru had already been unable to feel his left shoulder. His hip and leg were also burning from lying in one position for too long. Yet, looking down blearily at the mob of dirty white hair that kept tickling his chin with each breath, he couldn't bring himself to move and risk disturbing Satoru.

Absent-mindedly, he took two of the many strands clinging to Satoru's sweaty temple and rolled them between his thumb and forefinger. They were softer than he remembered. But maybe he remembered wrongly – his mind still felt as if it was wrapped in too much cotton and when he tried to breach into it, it would give way and suck him in without really opening up to him.

It was such a disorienting sensation, being privy to memories that weren't his and yet, engraved into every cell of his body and playing behind his closed lids like a movie. And then, there were his own memories before death, hazy, flighty when he tried to reach for them and only the pads of his fingers grazed them. They were there, he remembered and yet, they hadn't fully settled into his consciousness.

*Except for...* He dipped his chin a little and brushed the tip of his nose over Satoru's red cheek, pulse spiking in startled delight when Satoru sighed, content, and his lips twitched into a sleepy smile. Satoru was - *everywhere*. His presence was thrumming through every inch of Suguru's body, so intensely that Suguru could grab it even through the fog and cotton and cling on. Grounding. Soothing.

It numbed the sensation of those claws raking insistently at his mind somewhere in the farthest corner of his brain.

"I'd tell you to get a room *but*."

Suguru hid the smile slowly curling around his mouth against Satoru's burning forehead as his gaze trailed Shōko. He did a poor job of it if her exaggerated eye roll was any indication.

"And I'd tell you that passive smoking is dangerous," he said, careful to keep his volume down.

“But you’re a doctor. Somehow.”

Just to spite him, she took a long drag of her cigarette and, once standing on the other side of the bed, exhaled a thick puff of smoke into his general direction. Not right into his face but close enough to itch in his nose. He scrunched it up in disgust.

“Don’t be such a wimp.” Unceremoniously, she dumped a bundle of clothes over their legs which elicited a low groan and twitch from Satoru. Suguru exhaled, relieved, when Satoru didn’t stir otherwise. Shōko snorted at that, the faint smile on her lips turning mischievous. “Na, more of a simp, hm?”

Suguru lifted his head ever so slightly and ran his thumb over Satoru’s knitted eyebrows, trying to smooth out the troubled frown between them. “He deserves some rest.”

Shōko leaned over Satoru and brought her own fingers to the side of his throat. “He’s been resting for over a month already.”

“*Resting*,” he repeated, any traces of amusement gone. The word tasted like lead on his tongue, heavy and bitter.

Suguru could still vividly recollect the look in Satoru’s eyes after the Prison Realm had cracked open – pupils blown impossibly wide, the edges of his startlingly blue irises trembling as if they were about to crumble and the splotches of grey-white swimming within them, reminiscent of clouds, swirling and swirling and swirling- *Haunted. Mad. In pain.*

He buried his face into Satoru’s hair and wound his free arm around his torso, fingers clenching tightly Satoru’s bloodied shirt. “I’m pretty sure he’s done anything but rest in there.”

Shōko hummed, clearly curious but she didn’t prod any further. “Well, the fever hasn’t gone down any and his cursed energy’s still erratic. If it doesn’t get better until noon, I might try some tests.” She paused and Suguru could almost picture her nibbling on her cigarette in contemplation. “But you two should really get cleaned up. You sure you don’t want me to have a look at you?”

He shook his head once without barely moving. “’s superficial mostly.”

“Huh, he didn’t want to hurt your body? I’m honestly not sure if that’s sweet or just sad.”

*Dumb*, Suguru would say. Sure, he had been fighting to regain full control back then – had only managed to do so in bits and pieces before – but he still couldn’t believe that Satoru refused to deal actual damage throughout that fight. Trying not to hurt Suguru’s body too much while fending off high ranked cursed spirits when his cursed energy kept fluctuating... Suguru was torn between the affection pulsating underneath heart and the indignant fury simmering through his veins.

“I should still check you over. The whole brain thing and coming back from the dead is kinda important, you know?”

On cue, a claw dug into his brain, lodging itself into the flesh and wriggling, saying, *I’m still here*. The stitches itched. He grimaced, half in pain, half in annoyance. “Maybe you should,” he conceded although he wasn’t sure whether she had heard him.

They were silent after that. The only sounds being Shōko’s quiet exhales and Satoru’s even quieter breathing; a comfortable lull. Suguru almost dozed off.

“We haven’t told anyone on the outside about this situation,” Shōko eventually continued in a conversational tone as if they were discussing the weather. “Yet. Frankly speaking, everything has

been shit when he was gone. Vultures and opportunists everywhere. And the school's not exactly popular right now." She snorted like she had just told him a private joke and Suguru wondered what that was about. "So, it wouldn't be smart to leak this information with Gojō in *this* state. The higher-ups will pounce. They will probably also ask for your execution."

"Just because they'll ask doesn't mean I will listen," Suguru huffed. "As if any of those cowards could do much." And he certainly wouldn't allow them anywhere near Satoru, right now. Or ever if he had his way, but unfortunately, that wasn't how this shitty life worked.

Shōko chuckled, low and amused. "I suppose. They love to feel powerful and it mostly works when they deal with children and mortals. You still gotta talk to Yaga, though."

Suguru grimaced at the reminder. It wasn't something he was looking forward to. He would deal with things one at a time, though. There were more pressing matters right now and since they were already talking about the current situation... Something stirred within him, flickering, growing, demanding attention.

"Hey, Shōko? In Shibuya..." He trailed off, uncertainly, his throat clogging up with nerves. He hadn't slept much during the night despite the exhaustion still weighing down his limbs. His fuzzy mind had been unable to rest, tormented by fragments of his own memories and those of *that bastard* whirring through his head as he had struggled to piece together the time he had lost.

With Satoru in his arms, there was only one thing robbing him of sleep – and the burning need to know was clashing against the sickening dread of foreboding.

"In Shibuya," he started again, face lifted enough to see Shōko. His voice cracked at the end, and he was grateful for Shōko frowning down at a clipboard instead of looking at him. "Did any of you run across two girls? Teenagers, around the age of your first years." A year wasn't much time to grow but perhaps, they had grown in his absence. Perhaps, they had changed their hair style or the way they dressed or how they held themselves. His insides clenched, aching. "Blond and black haired."

If he hadn't been watching her so closely, he would have missed how she froze up for a split second. His stomach plummeted and kept plummeting until his vision swam and acidic bile crawled over his tongue. *Ah*. His fingers spasmed, twisted into Satoru's shirt, clumsily pawing against Satoru's spine, feeling the heat of his flesh.

"Kind of," Shōko said as if he hadn't already gotten his answer.

And really, this should have been enough. He ought to stop, keep quiet and let himself be swallowed whole by the pit that kept widening in the pit of his stomach. Beg that the fog around his consciousness would numb him enough that he could forget. *But-* "How?"

Shōko stared at him from underneath her lashes, her gaze peeling away every single layer of his skin to look at his rotten insides.

The thing about Ieiri Shōko was that she never *judged* despite the teasing and jabs. You could murder a whole village and walk up to her, offering a lighter and she'd call you a *criminal* with a smile and accept said lighter. Perhaps, there was no other way for her to deal with the jujutsu world's garbage – and Suguru and Satoru's crazy. Hence, her gaze never felt intrusive, it never made him uncomfortable. But it was so clinical as if taking you apart required her utmost concentration and Suguru didn't dare to move until she had finished.

When her lips thinned and expression closed off, though, he did wonder what it was that the doctor

in her had seen. Or maybe the ghost of a friend still clinging to her.

“Ryomen Sukuna. Are you aware of that situation?”

He nodded slowly. There was a lot of information bouncing around in his skull and some of it was still hard to make sense of, but on a superficial level he knew of everything the body-snatcher had known. Ryomen Sukuna having incarnated in a boy who had eaten his fingers was easy to grasp.

“In Shibuya, his host, Itadori Yūji, lost control to Sukuna after being fed ten of his fingers at once.” She paused, plucking off her half-burnt cigarette, lips pursed in reluctance – it only added to the sickening churning of Suguru’s guts. “From what Itadori-kun explained, those girls were trying to make a deal with Sukuna.”

*For me*, he realized, horrified. It had to have been for him. For his *corpse*.

“He killed them,” Shōko sighed. “We found the remains, but we didn’t know who they were. Itadori-kun mentioned that one of them was called Mimiko? I think?”

Suguru let go of Satoru’s shirt to press the back of his hand against his mouth, keeping it shut because otherwise, he might spit out the entrails crawling up his throat. *Remain*. Not bodies. Had they even been recognizable as human beings when found? Had they received proper last rites? Had anyone *mourned* them like they deserved?

Ryomen Sukuna... The King of Curses. Suguru knew his girls. Nanako had a mouth on her but they weren’t dumb – they would have been careful not to get on Sukuna’s bad side if they wanted him to help them. But curses lacked any sense of humanity and they acted on whims and without reason. Had that been it? Had Sukuna killed Nanako and Mimiko on a petty whim? *Just like that?*

“*Getō*,” Shōko said, her tone serious with the faintest hint of pleading underneath. “Itadori-kun is... *important*. To Gojō.”

And ah, she could read him so well because there was fury simmering in his blood and so, so much resentment welling up within him that he could taste it through the bile coating his mouth.

Itadori Yūji... Suguru remembered him too. Battered and on his knees, drenched in blood, desperate, furious, childlike- “*Give him back!*”

Hot pain shot through his temples, eliciting a sharp hiss from him. The stitches on his forehead throbbed and the skin around them seemingly melted, the heat scorching his nerves until pain and numbness blended together dizzily.

“*We want to help Getō-sama create his world. Ne, Mimiko? So, please, let us help!*”

“*Give back Gojō-sensei!*”

“Hey, what...?”

Suguru carefully removed his arm from under Satoru’s head and settled him gently on the abandoned pillow behind him. Wordlessly, he slid off the bed, the world around him spinning nauseatingly as soon as his naked feet touched the cool floor, and he staggered out of the room, Shōko’s shouting drowned out by the static pounding between his ears. Only muscle memory carried him toward one of the many adjacent bathrooms.

He fell on his knees in front of the toilet seat and emptied his stomach into it.

*Deaddeadeadeaddead-*

His stomach didn't stop churning even after there was nothing left to vomit. He dry-heaved until his lungs burnt, choking on his own spite. Stray strands were sticking to his face further covering his blurry sight.

*They're dead because of me.*

Once, Getō Suguru had promised a young girl that she could live a long life to its fullest, not as someone's vessel but as her own person – and watched her brains being splattered in the very next breath of air because of his arrogant carelessness.

*Liar, liar, what a liar.*

Once, Getō Suguru had promised two little girls that he would create a safe and warm world for them – and wasn't even present when they were ripped to shreds because of his failures.

*When did you become such a liar, Getō Suguru?*

His fingers tightened around the marble seat until its coldness turned them numb and festered under his skin like a parasite. Over a decade and through death and he was still that foolish teenager unable to keep his word. Always failing. How pathetic.

How come someone like him got to live again when Mimiko and Nanako didn't? This rotten world truly strived for injustice.

Suguru didn't immediately notice the hands on his bare shoulders. Not until they slipped over toward his chest and another body collapsed against his back. He tensed up for a second, startled to the core, only to go boneless in the hold the very next moment.

A heartbeat. Two. He breathed in and out through his nose. Waited for his sight to stop swimming and the static in his ears to quieten and his own voice to stop whispering to him. Then, gingerly, he leaned his head back far enough until he could press his face into the burning skin of the crook of Satoru's neck.

The fog around his mind cleared a little.

“Should you be up?” he asked hoarsely.

Satoru hummed, more an exhale of hot air than an actual noise. He took his time to reply, long enough that Suguru wondered if he had fallen asleep. When he did open his mouth, his voice was so low that if Suguru hadn't been basically glued to him, he would have missed it, “Shōko told me. ‘bout ya... girls.”

Suguru's throat clogged up as if he had swallowed an especially large ball of cursed energy that refused to be moved, painfully stuck in place and its foul taste creeping into every cell it touched while bile clawed at it from underneath and saliva gathered above it. *His* girls. Had anyone ever referred to them as such? It was odd coming from Satoru. Suguru had never even introduced them...

“Shōko's turned into a gossip, huh?” he croaked – and immediately cringed at his own pitiful attempt at humor. Thankfully, Satoru didn't say anything to that and Suguru allowed the silence to stretch out between them while he soaked up the buzzing warmth Satoru offered. It was soothing.

*What a picture we make*, he thought derisively. *Huddled in a probably dirty bathroom that stinks of*

*vomit.*

When Satoru tilted his head to look at him, his eyes were bloodshot and hazy but there was something in there, between the clouds and the endless sky, something that slithered around Suguru's ribcage and squeezed until the bones cracked under the pressure. He opened his own mouth on instinct, unsure what he wanted to say, but Satoru beat him to it.

"I'm sorry."

Suguru blinked, confused whether he had heard correctly. "What for?"

Satoru pinched his eyebrows together and moved his lips several times without any sound leaving them as if he were struggling to string his sentences together. "Shibuya," he started – and stopped, flushed face contorted into a frustrated grimace.

And Suguru understood what Satoru failed to convey. It hung heavily between them, a noose around his throat, crushing his windpipe. He shifted until he could press his forehead to Satoru's temple, their noses brushing. "Don't be stupid, Satoru."

"I..." Satoru sighed, exasperated, before opting to peck the corner of Suguru's mouth like that was the most natural thing to do after over ten years of separation and a year spent apart through death. Suguru's rib cage cracked a little more, splinters lodging into the tender flesh of his fluttering heart. "I'm still happy. To have you back."

"*Seriously,*" Suguru huffed, voice breaking on emotions. "Still didn't learn how to curse me even a little, huh?"

Satoru shrugged. "What for?"

*Leaving? Harming your students? Causing trouble even after death?* He didn't say any of that, though. To him, December twenty-fourth, when time had stood still in that cold, dingy alleyway, was one of the freshest and clearest memories, scorched into his very soul: "*You're still my one and only, you know that, right?*" Satoru had said - just after Suguru had tried to kill one of his precious students. After over ten years of distance and hurting and enmity.

Maybe he hadn't understood Satoru's mindset as well as he had always believed before that moment. He was certain that he had a better grasp of it now. Questioning Satoru's foolish loyalty was futile. And maybe, Suguru was just selfish for craving this - being able to fall back on someone who welcomed him with open arms.

Suguru pressed his fingers against Satoru's chin when Satoru tried to lean in again. "I'm literally disgusting right now."

Satoru frowned, almost pouted too before taking him in. His frown deepening. He jerked his head to the right. "Wash up?"

Suguru eyed the shower at the other end of the room, separated by a flimsy curtain. There was a bundle of clothes lying on the floor nearby, closer to the door. He could have pointed out that showering wouldn't get rid of the stench in his mouth. Instead... "*Together?*" he asked, incredulous.

"Sure," Satoru said as if Suguru had actually asked and not expressed his bewilderment. "Why not?"

He *had* to have been half-delirious, there was no other explanation for this. Right? But if that was



the case and Satoru attempted to shower by himself, he might fall and break his skull. And Suguru really didn't feel like being by himself right now, either – he preferred Satoru's overwhelming presence filling so much space in his mind that there was nothing left for anything else.

“Alright,” Suguru conceded. He reached up and carded his fingers through Satoru's dirty hair. “Let's clean that up first.”

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“Gojō-sensei!”

They had barely stepped out of the bathroom when Satoru was wrenched out of his grip. Suguru's right hand snapped up on instinct, the familiar thrum of cursed energy singeing his blood, but he froze mid-motion when a flash of peach – familiar to his brain, unfamiliar to himself – caught his attention and he remembered where they were.

*Itadori Yūji.*

The boy had latched on to Satoru with his face pressed into Satoru's chest and his fingers clenched tightly enough into the back of Satoru's loose sweater that Suguru could see his knuckles turn white and veins popping out starkly against his skin. Belatedly or perhaps hesitantly, Satoru returned the hug, wounding one arm gingerly around the boy while patting his hair with his other hand. Was it the fever slowing down his reactions? Or genuine surprise at the sudden physical contact?

When Itadori lifted off his face to stare at Satoru, Suguru could make out a scar going from his forehead down over the bridge of his nose toward his right cheek, and the markings underneath his eyes. A second set of-

*Sukuna's vessel.*

The lump in Suguru's throat throbbed to life. Bile and acrid crawled over his tongue once again.

“Did you take a shower?”

Suguru's gaze snapped toward the second student lingering half a step behind Itadori; not quite invading the private bubble the other two had created but close enough to indicate a desire to do so. He didn't, though. Instead, he looked past Satoru toward Suguru, expression impassive if it were not for the shadows slithering over his features. And, *ah*.

Fushiguro Megumi. Looking like this- as if he were trying to poke a hole into Suguru, he resembled that girl a lot - that Zen'in reject. And even more so *that man*.

Something slick and sticky curled around his guts, moving them around, squishing them against each other as if he had swallowed a curse not fully ready to be swallowed and now, revolting uninhibited amidst his entrails.

“Did you *both* take a shower?” Fushiguro repeated his question, scandalized. “*Together?*”

Itadori snapped back so fast that he definitely had to have given himself whiplash. If Suguru had been able to muster up even the tiniest shred of humor, it would have been hilarious how they were staring between them gobsmacked. Right now, though, his hair was dripping wet, his muscles were

heavy and aching and his hands were itching to pull Satoru back.

“Yes!” Satoru chirped, either ignorant or oblivious of his students’ growing horror. “But, Yūji!” He ran his right forefinger along the scar on Itadori’s forehead. “What’s with that?”

“Oh, that...” Itadori took a step back, forcing Satoru to drop his hand, but his own fingers still clung to the hem of Satoru’s sweater, apparently unwilling to let go. He exchanged an uncertain glance with Fushiguro.

“Don’t change the subject,” Fushiguro intervened in a very poor attempt to change the topic. “You can’t just leave like that and- and...” He waved about his left arm in Suguru’s direction clumsily. “And shower with him!”

“Who showered with whom?”

*They’re multiplying*, Suguru thought sullenly when the girl from last night - the one with the eyepatch - walked out of one of the infirmaries. Her face lit up when she noticed Satoru and there was a spring in her gait as she made her way over, munching on a cupcake. Kugisaki Nobara, that was the name, if his mind wasn’t tricking him.

“You’re up! I got you a vanilla cupcake but you weren’t in your room so...” She bent forward a little and scrutinized him critically. There was less than an inch between her temple and Satoru’s chest, she definitely didn’t need to be that close to examine him, and Suguru wondered if this was an awkward attempt to receive a hug without actually hugging or asking for it. “You’re kinda red, though.”

“Pretty sure he’s still got a fever,” Itadori said.

Suguru had almost forgotten that Satoru was, in fact, a teacher. He had been aware of that fact even prior to his death, of course. And he had met some of his students last year, much to both of their chagrin. Last night, they hadn’t caught his attention, not even when they had rudely crowded the infirmary and their suspicious, judgemental gazes had followed his every movement. But seeing them now... flocking around Satoru like lost ducklings who had just found their mother, grasping for him, fretting in their own weird ways...

*I won't have that*, he realized. His chest tightened at the sight, squeezing his heart, pushing the splinters of his cracked rib cage deeper into the already bleeding flesh. He couldn’t tell whether that ugly sensation crawling out of the wounds was envy or scorn or something else altogether.

Jerkily, he grabbed the ends of the towel around his neck and moved it slowly up and down and up again, rubbing his skin raw until it distracted him from the scalding pain oozing out of his chest.

At the edge of his vision, he saw Satoru lift a trembling arm and rap his knuckles gently against Kugisaki’s eyepatch. “What happened?”

Kugisaki startled, clearly caught off-guard by the sudden inquiry. Her hold on the cupcake stiffened and the grin she forced her mouth into was so strained that Suguru wondered if it hurt. “Well, you know, fighting curses and all that.”

“But Shō-”

“Satoru.” Suguru was tempted to move closer, grab Satoru and cling on but the brats tensed up as if he was about to attack them, so he refrained. Satoru himself turned half toward him in question; he *was* flushed, his eyelids kept drooping and he might have been swaying a little. “I’m sure you can bug them later. Let’s get you back to bed before you fall asleep on your feet, hm?”

The thing was that Suguru - *knew*. What had happened in Shibuya, what had happened post-Shibuya, what these kids had been fighting. The losses. The toll. Everything. He knew in an abstract way like reading it off a history book, being aware without having been present. And they obviously didn't want to tell Satoru yet or perhaps Shōko had asked them to wait until Satoru was better, which Suguru understood. Satoru would be less than thrilled and him lashing out at the higher-ups and *more* was a very possible outcome.

Seriously, though. If they wanted to hide information from him, then they should have *avoided* him. Sick or not, his students being heavily scarred or missing body parts wasn't something Satoru would not notice. Maybe they were just dumb?

"Am fine!" Satoru huffed, red cheeks puffed up indignantly and his lower lip protruding ever so slightly. How convincing.

Abruptly, his glazed eyes snapped wide open and he lurched forward without warning, grabbing hold of Suguru's wrist and tugging him toward himself. Maybe it was a trick of the light but it almost seemed like the kids huddled that tiny smidge closer to Satoru in reaction. "I haven't introduced you!" And oh, didn't they look eager for said introduction? Suguru could sympathize. "Guys, this is-"

"Getō Suguru."

*Oh, fucking great.* He resisted the urge to groan and instead, rolled his eyes exaggeratedly before focusing them on his old teacher. The man had just rounded the corner at the end of the hallway, his steps echoing loudly between the walls, features set in stone. Okkotsu was trailing behind him because, *of course*, these brats were like ants crawling out of every hole in this godforsaken building.

At least, the boy didn't spare him any glares this time around when he headed for Satoru, smiling like an eager puppy. Since neither eye-patch nor Itadori had moved out of the way and that didn't stop Satoru from stretching forward to ruffle Okkotsu's hair, they ended up in a very awkward cluster. Fushiguro eyed them with a mix of apprehension and indecisiveness.

"Sensei, are you alright?" Okkotsu asked.

"course," Satoru replied at the same time as Suguru grumbled, "*No*."

Okkotsu stared at him briefly, more surly than hostile, before promptly ignoring him. "But you're burning up!"

"And you're squishing me!" Kugisaki hissed, annoyed, but she certainly didn't ram her elbow *that* hard into Okkotsu's side. He barely twitched though his smile turned apologetic.

"Well, he *is* conscious, that's something," Yaga grumbled. Even through the stupid sunglasses, Suguru could feel him look at him. "Suguru, we need to talk."

Suguru scowled. "Tough luck, I don't want to." All he wanted was to crawl into bed, bury his face into Satoru's soft hair and shut down the world around him. He was exhausted and the threads of his patience were running thin and he was *sick* of everyone.

Yaga was unimpressed. "I wasn't requesting."

The air shifted from awkwardly happy to tense, the temperature dropping to freezing degrees and reminding Suguru that he was barefoot. As was Satoru, he realized, alarm stirring in his chest.

“Too bad for you.” His temples were also throbbing unbearably by now. And while the scratching at the back of his brain wasn’t painful, it was persistent enough to be bothersome. “Try again later. Maybe.”

Yaga pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed in frustration. “You have some nerves walking in here and showing me that attitude! You do realize that there’s still a kill-on-sight order for you, don’t you?”

Suddenly, it was so quiet that Suguru was sure they could hear his heart pounding louder and louder with every passing second. Each beat reverberated through his body, from head to toe, shooting sparks of hot, white fury through his system that caught on fire at the ugly stitches on his forehead.

Satoru shifted to stand partially in front of Suguru, Itadori’s fingers gliding off his sweater at the motion while his own grip on Suguru turned firmer. The stubborn idiot was definitely struggling to stay upright. “*Technically*, he already died, so that order’s expired.”

It was said with so much conviction that Suguru couldn’t help but chuckle despite the anger and disgust choking him. He clamped down on the sound as soon as it escaped, removed Satoru’s fingers from around his wrist with some difficulty and instead, stepped up next to Satoru, wound his arms around his hips and pressed his left cheek into Satoru’s shoulder blade.

There had to be something wrong with him - why else did the haze around his mind clear the instant he touched Satoru? It was like he could breath fresh air again after ages and let it blow away any negativity brewing in his veins. Like finding ground after having been falling into a bottomless pit for seemingly forever.

This *couldn’t* be normal.

The looks from the brats - ranging from Fushiguro’s disgust to Okkotsu’s discomfort and Itadori and Kugisaki’s mirrored embarrassment - were pettily satisfying, though.

“You know, *sen - sei*,” he started tauntingly, lifting his head enough that he could peer at Yaga. “I know everything the brain-guy knew. Everything that was happening around here.” Ah, there it was. The slight stiffening of Yaga’s posture, the clenching of his jaw. “Honestly, why am I not surprised that you think orders from those ungrateful dirtbags up high still mean shit here?”

Had any of them genuinely tried to unseal Satoru? As soon as he had been gone, everyone had been concerned with their own skin and their own gains. Satoru wasted his life cleaning up after these cowards and they had all basked in the security he had provided, unashamedly taking advantage for as long as they could. But none of them had been inclined to help *Satoru* when he had needed them.

That wasn’t even taking into account their attempted execution of Itadori Yūji in Satoru’s absence or alienating the school and students for opposing them. It wasn’t any of Suguru’s concern, he had cut ties to the school years ago and these kids meant nothing to him - but they were important to Satoru. Surely, Yaga realized the shitstorm to come once Satoru was up to date?

Yet, the fact that Yaga kept clinging to those same rats who hadn’t cared about Satoru and wouldn’t hesitate to sacrifice every single one of them if they could gain something from it... Pathetic.

“We can talk,” Suguru conceded, much calmer now that he was certain that he had won this round. “*Later.*”

Yaga took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly, contemplating, before he nodded albeit reluctantly. He turned around and walked back down the way he had come, halting only for a moment with his back to them. "For all that it matters, welcome back."

Suguru wasn't sure if that was directed toward him, in which case it would be a poor lie, or Satoru, but he couldn't care less.

He could feel Satoru's eyes boring into the top of his head and tightened his hold. "Don't worry," he said before Satoru could ask. "I'll tell you later." Well, someone else would, probably.

This was comfortable; warm, Satoru's palms rubbing over the backs of his hands soothing. So, obviously, it couldn't last.

"Didn't you say that you wanted him to go back to bed?" The annoyed question was emphasized by two different sets of hands nudging against Suguru's arms.

Even if Fushiguro had a fair point, Suguru decided that he hated Satoru's kids.

## Chapter End Notes

- Geto-angst! Geto-angst! But there was soft SatoSugu too so it should be fine???
- Honestly, though, I really disliked that Gege killed off MimiNana in canon (maybe there's hope for Nanako?) because they deserved better and they had potential. And it's always on my mind that Sukuna was the one who killed them and poor Yuuji is stuck with Sukuna, so that ought to be another point of friction between SatoSugu if Geto comes back :/
- I was torn on whether to write the shower scene or not but then, the chapter already got so long, lol. Anyway, it wasn't anything much, just Gojo dozing off while Geto did all the work and only being coherent enough to play with Geto's hair, lmao.
- There might be mutual animosity between the students and Geto but it should get better. Eventually. Hopefully. Lol.
- Off-topic here, but in case some of you haven't seen it yet and might be interested: [This is an interest check](#) for a potential SatoSugu week around Valentines Day, being hosted [here \(tumblr\)](#) and [here \(twitter\)](#). If you're interested, do have a look! A shout-out would also be appreciated <3
- Merry Christmas to everyone who celebrates and happy holidays to everyone else! I hope that the new year will be kinder to all of us :)

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

Oooh, I still made it within the month! :p I have been pretty busy with the stsg-week fics and am just. Grinding this out in-between, lol. Btw! The manga made some spicy revelations recently and some of those went into consideration for this story but more on that in the notes at the end (and this chapter itself).

Thanks for all the great feedback! I am stunned whenever I look at the response this story has been getting and I hope you'll keep enjoying it <3 If I haven't yet replied to a comment of yours, chances are that I still might - I apologize for the delay, I can be... like this. Sometimes T\_T

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There was a stuffed toy on the bed when they returned. Or something that used to be one; there was only a head missing a huge chunk on one side and the open edges burnt black, scraps of charred cloth flimsily hanging off it.

Satoru could swear that Suguru had stopped breathing while staring at it for long, excruciating heartbeats. When he finally reached for it, his movements were stiff, almost mechanical, slowed down by the slight tremors Satoru only noticed because he was standing so close. He pressed the toy - had it been a ghost once? - to his chest and sucked in a deep breath before climbing on the narrow bed and laying down with his back to everyone, long wet hair obscuring his face from view. His free hand, though, stretched backward in an awkward angle, searching, and Satoru followed after him without prompting, allowing Suguru's fingers to wrap around his wrist. He barely suppressed a wince at their shockingly cold temperature.

It couldn't have been a comfortable position to lie in but if that was what Suguru wanted, then Satoru wouldn't deny him. He covered Suguru's finger with his own, rubbing gently over them, and leaned over, resting his forehead against Suguru's nape, burying his nose in some strands of wet hair and inhaling the minty scent of his hair. His fever would hopefully help warm up Suguru faster, if nothing else.

Although Satoru wasn't sure if he could warm him up from the inside.

At the edge of his awareness, the sensation of several gazes lingering on him - *them* - grew itchier and itchier until even his fuzzy mind couldn't ignore it any longer. He reluctantly pushed himself away and into an upright position, one leg tucked under him and the other dangling off the bed, and shifted his focus away from Suguru's curled up form to raise a questioning eyebrow at his students.

They didn't look like they were about to sit down any time soon, but their hovering was sending his lethargic nerves into a jittery frenzy. He squinted, willing his vision to clear more.

For how long exactly had he been sealed? Injuries notwithstanding, the kids didn't look too different and Yaga and Shōko hadn't changed one bit, either. So, it couldn't have been *that* long, right? Yet... He hadn't noticed it earlier but it was obvious now that he had settled down and could observe them calmly: The atmosphere sizzling around them was heavy in a way that had his skin crawl with dread.

And it wasn't just the students. Something was *off* in general - outside. He couldn't get a good read on it but something was bugging him in the general flow of cursed energy *everywhere*. It had his hackles raise and unease crawl around his spine, constantly tickling.

"Yūji," he said, trying to fill the awkward silence. For a split second, he was distracted by the scar marring Yūji's face, letting him seem much older than he was, and dread pooled into the pit of his stomach. Slowly. Steadily. Like a leaking tap. "Have you eaten any more fingers?"

Shōko had mentioned ten in Shibuya but... Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him or it was simply the unsteady flow of his cursed energy fooling him – his *Six Eyes* turning on and off like a defect light switch was nauseating – but he could swear that Yūji had consumed more than fifteen fingers by now. The air clinging to him was too saturated by the chilling, bloodcurdling malicious presence of *Sukuna* despite Sukuna not having stirred even once, yet.

Yūji shifted from one foot to the other, hands buried deeply into the pockets of his hoodie, expression too carefully neural to belong to *Yūji*. Satoru also didn't miss how Megumi grabbed the hem of Yūji's hoodie between his thumb and forefinger and tugged and Yūji immediately stopped his fidgeting to lean into Megumi's personal space as if it were the most natural thing to do. Or how Nobara had smoothed out the wrapper of her cupcake only to bunch it up again and repeat the motion, her movements stiff and agitated. And if Yūta chewed any harder on his lower lip, he would bite a chunk off.

He could taste the discomfort hanging over them like the persistent odor of foul eggs in the back of his throat. His nausea churned more vehemently, his vision blurring slightly again.

"Seventeen," Yūji eventually murmured into his hood. "I've eaten seventeen in total now. In Shibuya." He faltered, literally *freezing* and his eyes glazing over as if they were seeing something no one else did.

Behind Satoru, Suguru stiffened and the hold on his wrist turned crushing. He could *feel* the temperature in the room drop.

Considering what Shōko had told him before he had rushed after Suguru earlier, Shibuya was definitely not a topic to be discussed, right now. At least, not with Yūji and Suguru present in the same room. Maybe they ought to stay away from each other indefinitely? What Sukuna had done wasn't Yūji's fault - it never would be in Satoru's opinion - but Suguru had every right to feel conflicted. Satoru was just glad that Suguru hadn't acted out yet; he didn't know how he would handle being forced to step between Suguru and Yūji.

Besides, his own head was so heavy and the constant sensation of nausea simmering in the depths of his stomach, refusing to dissipate, was driving him mad. Was he even picking up on the right things or was his mind deluding him? Reading too much into the kids' mannerisms?

But *seventeen*! And what Sukuna had done in Shibuya... if he had killed Suguru's girls, surely, they couldn't have been his only victims. The guilt had to be eating Yūji - kind, compassionate Yūji - alive.

Satoru raised his left arm and waved Yūji closer. The boy hesitated for all of a split second before

he obliged with Megumi and Nobara watching him like hawks. Once he was in reach, Satoru dragged him down by the shoulder and wound his arm around Yūji's neck, pulling him into a hug.

"Let's talk when I don't feel like throwing up every other minute," he said, voice light. "But, and that's how I see things, Sukuna's actions are his own. Not yours."

Yūji twitched in his embrace, his hands brushing against his side, but he didn't quite return the hug. Just leaned into it, clinging to the sides of his loose shirt, and taking a few long, shaky breaths. It was reassuring, at least.

Satoru let go with a smile. "Alright, then! *Shoo!* How come you've got so much time to spare that you're wasting it on me?"

"Well, *someone* has to visit you," Nobara snorted.

Satoru couldn't help but linger on the eyepatch, wondering. *Later.* "How selfless of you. But it's fine, really! You don't need to stay around for me!"

"Are you seriously trying to get rid of us so you can..." Megumi made a vague gesture toward Suguru, grimacing as if he had swallowed a lemon whole.

He frowned, confused. "So, I can what?"

Megumi huffed, flustered, and Satoru couldn't tell whether it was out of annoyance or embarrassment. There was a faint sound from behind him, like a muffled huff or snort, but he wasn't sure if he was hearing things. Before Megumi could have tried to reply, although he didn't seem very eager to, Yūji - bless him - took both his friends' arms and dragged them toward the door despite their startled protests. "We'll check in later!"

Yūta hesitated, gaze flickering from Satoru to Suguru and back. "Are you sure you'll be fine?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

Yūta opened his mouth and closed it, shaking his head with a resigned sigh and turning around. They were definitely behaving oddly. Not that Satoru didn't appreciate this - knowing that they were worried for his sake had warmth buzz in his chest - but since when had anyone been overly concerned for *his* well-being? There never had been any reason to be.

*You got sealed, though,* he remembered sourly. *Must have affected them pretty hard, huh?*

Once the four of them were gone, Satoru wrapped himself around Suguru's back. He brought his right arm around Suguru's torso, intertwining their fingers, and curled his other hand into Suguru's shirt just underneath his neck.

*Damn.* He had already been so hot but this close to Suguru felt as if he had stepped into a hearth in the middle of summer. It was also *good*, though. Grounding. Comforting.

When Suguru had died, Satoru had stayed so long with his body that the cold it had emitted had permanently settled itself into every single one of his cells. It came and went as it pleased and without warning. Right now, it was yielding to Suguru's almost aching heat; Satoru exhaled, content.

Suguru was *here*, alive. No matter how, this wasn't a dream.

His heart thrummed with delight. Steady, whole.



Lulled by the rhythm and the comfort pulsating around him, his eyelids fluttered sluggishly. He was really tired.

“This used to be Mimiko’s,” Suguru eventually murmured, unprompted. Satoru rested the side of his face into the crook where left shoulder and throat met, indicating that he was still awake and listening. “It was all torn up when I found them. I stitched it back together for her; it looked ugly.” He snorted wistfully. “But Mimiko kept it. Helped her channel her technique.”

Mimiko. One of the girls.

To him, they had just been some faceless, nameless kids whom Suguru had taken in. Satoru had never met them himself. Of course, he had always *known* about them. How could he not have? He had investigated every detail of Suguru’s last mission in a pathetic endeavor to understand what had gone wrong and why. To find a mistake and solve it as if that would rewind time itself and bring Suguru back to him. *Stupid.*

Knowing was one thing, though. Hearing from Suguru’s own mouth that he had had a life which Satoru hadn’t been a part of... His guts twitched painfully, his breath hitching and throat tightening. Suguru stilled as if he had noticed and Satoru made sure to relax his muscles and even out his breathing.

How selfish. This wasn’t about him.

To distract himself, he said, “You and stitching dolls? Yaga would be proud.”

Suguru huffed derisively. “As if. And please, I’m *nothing* like him.”

The intense amount of venom directed at their old teacher caught Satoru off-guard. What was he supposed to say to that?

Something rough scratched over his knuckles, startling him. It took him a few moments to realize that it had to have been the burnt toy. “They were good girls.”

*I’m sorry*, was burning on the tip of Satoru’s tongue but he swallowed it. Whether Shibuya was to be blamed on him or not - it *was* - empty words didn’t mean much and neither would Suguru appreciate them. He hadn’t in the bathroom, after all.

“Honestly, I’m kind of jealous. You’ve got your students with you.”

Satoru blinked, the bitter confession settling heavily on his mind. He tried to imagine what it would have been like - being released from the *Prison Realm* and stumbling into a world that was missing *any* of them. Maki or Yūji or Nobara or Meg-

Acid bubbled in the pit of his stomach, stirring the nausea until the taste of bile spread in his mouth.

How had Suguru *not* lashed out yet? Satoru would have already started to burn down the world in retaliation. Yet, Suguru hadn’t laid a finger on Yūji... *Because of me?*

“You’re not alone, you know?” he croaked. “I know it’s not the same, but *I* am here.”

His hand was pulled away from the toy and higher up, Suguru’s lips pressing into the back of it, warm, tingling. He remained silent, though, and that spiked a wave of anxiety within Satoru.

“What are you going to do now?” he wondered against the curve of Suguru’s shoulder. When there

was no immediate reply once again, he added more quietly, “If you’re going to leave, I’d like a notice in advance this time.” The joke tasted as rotten on his tongue as it sounded terrible in his ears.

The long, weighty pause hanging over them had him regret saying anything at all. He parted his lips, ready to retract, to dismiss it as the nonsense blabbering of a delirious man when Suguru shifted, turning around so that they were face to face.

Suguru entangled their legs and pressed so close that there was not an inch of space left between them, the toy squeezed between their abdomens. Slowly, he reached up to cradle Satoru’s face and rest their forehead against each other. He wasn’t quite smiling, but it was a soft expression, nonetheless. Reassuring.

“I’m not leaving.”

Honest. Determined.

“Someone’s gotta watch your back, anyway. Those kids are useless and everyone else is either a snake or on thin fucking ice.”

Satoru hit his knee into Suguru’s thigh, more playful than anything else. “My students are not useless!”

“They didn’t even manage to free you,” Suguru muttered drily. “*Useless.*”

“I’m sure they tried their best,” Satoru huffed. The laughter ringing in his voice betrayed his sternness, though. “Stop ragging on them.”

Suguru only hummed skeptically in response.

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Yūji was talking to someone whom he shouldn’t be talking to and while Satoru didn’t mean to *stare* - he had wanted to stretch his legs while Shōko and Suguru were busy, maybe go see the kids - he couldn’t look away, either. What the actual- Maybe his fever was really making him delusional. Or it was the lack of his cursed energy steadily flowing through him; the emptiness that ensued in between bouts was rattling at his mind.

An arm wedged itself into his vision, startling him out of his staring, and a steaming cup was held under his nose invitingly. He blinked down, surprised, before his gaze settled on Megumi’s conflicted face. “It’s genmaicha,” Megumi murmured, not quite looking at him. “Teiri-san mentioned that you were nauseous.”

Stunned, Satoru accepted the offered cup and took a cautious sip. It wasn’t overly hot, and the nutty flavor mixed with some sugar melted nicely on his tongue. “*You* made me tea?”

“It’s not like tea’s hard to make,” Megumi grumbled. He was clutching a can of something - juice? - in his own hands. “Even I can manage that much.”

Which hadn’t been Satoru’s point and Megumi was fairly aware of that. And while Satoru would have usually teased him for caring, he refrained now, not particularly in the mood, and instead ruffled Megumi’s wild hair affectionately. Warmth was tingling through his veins.

“Stop that!” Although Megumi said that, he didn’t make any attempt to move away.

“By the way.” Satoru took a step back and gestured outside of the window. He squinted into the distance, still unsure whether he was seeing correctly. That certainly looked like one of the cursed spirits from Shibuya. Or, well, not really a cursed spirit but not exactly a human being, either. One of the Death Paintings, was it? What was he doing down there, sitting so close to Yūji as if it were normal?

Megumi shifted to look past his shoulder. His expression immediately soured, lips turning downward and eyebrows furrowing in mild annoyance. “That’s Chōsō. Yūji’s *onii-chan*.”

*Huh?* Satoru’s gaze wandered from Yūji to Chōsō and back to Megumi, slowly and carefully. “You know, my head’s still feeling weird, so I’m not sure if I heard that right.”

Megumi sighed, partly frustrated, partly tired. “We’re not sure what his problem is. In Shibuya, he almost killed Yūji and then, just started to call him his younger brother.”

“Like Tōdō.” Interesting. Something stirred in the back of his mind. A half formed thought full of curiosity.

“Yeah,” Megumi grumbled even *more* sourly. Satoru watched him for a few moments while zipping on his tea, lips twitching in amusement. Was Megumi *jealous*? Before he could have made a teasing remark about how Megumi surely didn’t want to be Yūji’s *brother*, the kid shook himself out of his stupor and his features immediately smoothed out. But he wasn’t looking quite right. Especially not when his full attention zeroed in on Satoru. “If you’re not feeling fine, why are you up and about?”

Satoru couldn’t help himself. “Are you *worried*, Megumi?”

Instead of getting angry and immediately denying the accusation, Megumi only pursed his lips as his gaze took in Satoru from head to toe critically. He stomped down on the urge to fidget under the unexpected scrutiny and its intensity. How strange.

“Shōko’s checking on Suguru,” he eventually gave in, too unnerved by Megumi’s uncharacteristic behavior. “I didn’t want to bother them, so.”

Megumi pushed himself away from the windowsill without quite letting go, balancing on the balls of his feet. He had his can pressed into the side of his left leg and his knuckles were turning white. There was the same displeased edge to his expression that he had sported earlier inside of the infirmary room. “Do you *really* trust that man?”

“Who? Suguru?” Satoru frowned, taken aback. Where did *that* come from? “Of course, I do.”

Megumi’s features fell into a grimace that looked out of place on his face. “Despite everything? So much happened in Shibuya. And after.”

Ah. Faint anger curled around his heart at the reminder of Shibuya and *that person*. His skin still crawled with disgust when he remembered how the imposter had taken off the top of Suguru’s head as if it were some kind of toy.

“Whatever that *brain* did isn’t Suguru’s fault,” Satoru murmured. “It’s... probably mine.” For not having gotten rid of Suguru’s body back then. Even more so because - he couldn’t bring himself to regret that. Not since that mistake, no matter how costly, had brought Suguru back.

How pathetically selfish. But Satoru had never claimed to be a good person.

“How is it your fault that some scumbag took advantage of your weakness?” Megumi bristled, completely misunderstanding him.

Satoru winced internally but maintained a small albeit confused smile outwardly. “Right. And it’s not Suguru’s fault either. Actually, I think you’d like him once you get to know him!” Involuntarily, his mind flickered toward Fushiguro Tōji and he resisted the urge to groan. Well, maybe it would take a good while for Suguru to warm up toward Megumi too... But once he did - surely, they would get along fine! Bond over their pet curses and shikigami!

“But he *was* a curse user before,” Megumi persisted stubbornly. “He killed people. He wanted to kill Okkotsu-senpai.”

Tiredly, Satoru averted his gaze. “It’s more complicated than that, Megumi.” Besides, Suguru had already died once - he had paid for whatever crimes the world wanted to hold against him. Wasn’t that enough?

“Didn’t he also betray you?”

Satoru put the half-empty cup down on the windowsill before it could slip through his trembling grip. In a broader sense, it wasn’t as if Suguru had owed him anything. But they *had* been dating, back then. And Satoru would prefer another eternity losing his sanity in the *Prison Realm* than relive that awful, maddening emptiness upon waking up one day only to have his world crumble around him without warning or explanation.

It *was* more complicated than that, though. Suguru had been in as bad a place in their third year - without Satoru noticing - as Satoru had been afterward. He had had over a decade to accept things and had never been able to bring himself to hold *that* against Suguru. It was between them, though. No one else.

“I never blamed him,” was all he chose to say on the matter. “It’s in the past now, anyway.”

“I don’t get it,” Megumi muttered, which sounded as if he were talking to himself rather than Satoru.

Satoru brushed his forefinger along the rim of his cup, smiling wistfully. “You don’t have to.”

The silence that fell over them afterward was - not awkward but not comfortable, either. An anxious tension lingered, and he wasn’t sure if it was his own nerves acting up or Megumi.

“Tsumiki woke up.”

Satoru’s heart missed a beat.

“She woke up,” Megumi repeated, voice too carefully neutral. “I guess it was because of the imposter but he was also the one who put her into a coma to begin with.”

Before his mind, Satoru conjured up the image of a young girl – *a gentle smile always set in place, warm eyes offering comfort, dark hair that he had gotten used to styling*. It flickered, replaced by – *unmoving body laying completely still, eyes closed in the mockery of sleep, lips devoid of a smile and warmth*.

Satoru stepped sideways and leaned his back against the wall next to the window, head swimming. His heartbeat was reverberating painfully through his whole body and his pulse pounding painfully between his ears.

There had been no signs of physical harm or anything else out of place with Tsumiki when she had fallen into a coma last year - which had been the main indicator that something *was* horribly wrong, of course. But how did that relate to the imposter? Why Tsumiki of all people? How and when would she have caught his attention? She wasn't even a jujutsu sorcerer...

*Was he keeping tabs on me?*

His stomach seized so suddenly, so vehemently that he clutched it on instinct, hunching forward ever so slightly.

"I'm not following."

Surprisingly enough, regret washed over Megumi's face, shattering the illusion of calm neutrality as he twitched forward, arms raised as if he wanted to reach out. "I shouldn't have brought that up. Ieiri-san didn't want us to tell you anything until you're fully healed."

And there was a lot to tell, apparently. Satoru might be sick but he wasn't an idiot - it was obvious that the kids were hiding things and that Shōko was avoiding certain topics. He had been gone for a good while, of course he had missed a lot. What was the use of coddling him, though? Wasn't it better to talk about everything as soon as possible? He needed to know what he was dealing with before the problems started knocking down their doors uninvited.

He swallowed his complaints and focused on what mattered right now. "How's she doing? And where is she?"

Megumi pressed his can to his forehead, eyelids fluttering shut, and exhaled a long, trembling breath. When he spoke next, each word shook with emotions so thick that Satoru could feel them peeling his skin, "The guy made her into a *vessel*. So, she's not herself anymore. Right now."

*What...*

Satoru pushed himself off the whole to crouch down in front of the boy, hands hovering uncertainly over his shoulders. His mind was racing. Vessel. And Megumi had said that the imposter had been responsible for her condition. So, *he* had turned her into a vessel? How? *Why?*

"It's a long story," Megumi sighed, eyes still closed. "Guy had marked a bunch of people and either turned them into vessels or rewired their brains to be able to use cursed techniques. Tsumiki was one among many."

Letting loose vengeful cursed spirits - and who knew how old those were - on the population while granting ignorant people power beyond their understanding... *Shit*. "How do you even rewire someone's brain?"

"By absorbing that patchface curse and extracting his technique for himself."

"Suguru can do that?!"

Megumi removed the can from his face to throw an unimpressed glare at him. "Yes. Unfortunately."

Right. "Where's Tsumiki now?"

He shrugged, frustration making his motion stiff.

Satoru put his hands on Megumi's shoulders and squeezed, trying to convey an assurance he

wasn't able to actually pull up for himself. Megumi relaxed under his touch, though.

If the Brain had done this and Suguru had managed to take control... maybe Suguru could-

A shrill, high-pitched whirring noise cut through his thread of thought - and the whole building.

The alarm quieted down as abruptly as it had sounded, but Megumi and he were already on their feet, alert. A cursed spirit on school grounds.

There was a crash close by that had Satoru tense up - one of the infirmaries? He frowned at the doors lined up on both sides of the hall, pulse spiking with anticipation. He was about to move forward when he noticed the back of Megumi's forearm pressing his chest. *Seriously?* He bristled, offended. "Me-"

"You don't have any cursed energy right now," Megumi explained without looking at him.

"Doesn't mean I'm an invalid," he huffed. Well.

"You probably can't even tell its source," the brat muttered full of judgement. He had barely finished his sentence when the third door on their left - Suguru and Shoko's - flew open with a loud bang.

Satoru saw the blood before anything else and was moving without realizing it, heart stuck somewhere between his lungs, squeezing the oxygen out of them. Megumi's hands tugged at him, trying to hold him back, but not hard enough for him to be unable to shake them off.

"Suguru!" There was so much blood caking Suguru's forehead, running down his temples and over the bridge of his nose, splitting into a branch fork at the tip. Sliding to his knees next to him, Satoru brushed aside his sticky bangs and removed the few stray strands that had fallen out of his loose bun from his face. He carefully tipped up Suguru's chin, examining the damage. "What happened?"

There was an unsettlingly wild glint in Suguru's dark eyes when they briefly met his and Satoru tried - unsuccessfully - to swallow the nerves crawling up his throat.

Shōko staggered out shortly after Suguru, catching her weight on the doorframe. The heel of one of her shoes was broken off.

"It's fine, it's fine!" she exhaled and while her voice was reassuring, the bloody claw marks on her jaw and the side of her neck were anything but. "I *might* have triggered something. But it's fine now!"

Satoru pressed the lower part of his palm to Suguru's temple, intent on wiping off the warm, still flowing blood, but faltered when Suguru hissed like a wounded cat as soon as he grazed the stitches. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw that Shōko's wounds were already healing; it made breathing a little easier.

"Did he attack you?" *Megumi.*

The fingers clutching his forearms, bracing Suguru, dug in painfully.

"No, he..." Shōko sighed, followed by a resigned click of her tongue. "He momentarily lost control to Mr. Brain."

A void split open between Satoru's guts. Chilling. Gnawing at his entrails.

Suguru lifted his head with a low groan. His gaze was burning with a myriad of emotions that Satoru couldn't detangle - the seething rage brimming underneath bitter frustration was all too clear to him, though.

Behind him, Megumi shifted closer until he could feel the boy's body heat licking at his back. "Wait, so he *doesn't* have full control?"

"Megumi," Satoru warned quietly.

He was ignored. "We were leaving him alone with Gojō-sensei when he could have lost control at any time?!"

"It was my fault," Shōko was saying as she knelt down behind Suguru and pressed her hand to his forehead, not deterred by his obvious pain. "He's fine now."

"Doesn't mean he will *stay* fine."

Satoru didn't have the patience for this. His nerves were frayed and the anxiety stirring in the pit of his stomach was making him nauseous again and the sight of all that *blood* painting Suguru's face...

He was Gojō Satoru! He could handle himself perfectly well. His students didn't need to fret over him like this!

"I do-" Suguru winced when Shōko retracted her palm. Satoru wasn't sure what exactly she had done but the bleeding had stopped completely. When he dabbed the end of his sleeve to Suguru's temple now, there was no exclamation of pain. Suguru rubbed over the stitches himself, mouth crinkling grimly. "He *is* still there," he admitted bitterly. "But I'm not... I'm not going to *just* hand over control to him." It sounded like a promise as much as a threat and reassuring enough to Satoru. Sheepishly and with a quick glance over his shoulder, he added, "Sorry."

"Whatever," Shōko grumbled as she stood back up. Her hair was a disheveled mess, her dark lipstick smudged around the left corner of her lips and her white coat was hanging off her left shoulder. She looked like she had just stepped away from a brawl with a wild animal. "Go, get some fresh air or something. I need a smoke. Or two. And a drink, yeesh."

"The alarm went off," Satoru mentioned, although his attention slipped back toward Suguru and messily cleaning him up. He scrunched up his nose at the heavy scent of iron in the air.

Shōko snorted. "Good old times, huh? Just the wrong sparring partner."

Suguru grimaced guiltily.

"*Sensei!*"

Annoyed, Satoru halted in his endeavor, dropping his arm, and taking a deep breath. He turned around on his haunches and stared up at his student, keeping his expression gentle despite the impatience hammering against the back of his heavy head. "Are *you* going to stay away from Yūji just because there's a risk of Sukuna coming out?"

Upset, Megumi visibly grit his teeth and balled his trembling hands to fists at his sides. "Not everyone's like Itadori!"

Was he still talking about Suguru or Tsumiki, Satoru wondered?

His own tension seeped out of him in an instant, replaced by a faint ache rippling through his chest. When he got up, the world around him was unsteady. Without a second thought, he pulled Megumi into a tight hug, disregarding his blood soaked sleeve pressed between Megumi's shoulder blades and ignoring how the boy bristled and waited for him to give in. He had never been one for physical affection and Satoru and Tsumiki had always had to fight to sprinkle scraps over him; he never rejected them immediately.

"I know I'm out of the loop here. But you'll have to trust me on this: it's fine. *Everything* will be fine."

Megumi pressed the top of his head against Satoru's chest, not quite getting away but not fully folding into the hug either. "You can't possibly know that."

He couldn't. He had miscalculated once and slipped up in Shibuya. Heck, he didn't even know what all he had to make right. But *Tsumiki*... "Maybe. But I can try." *I'm here. I'll work it out.*

Megumi's shoulders sagged in resignation. Satoru couldn't help but smile when he leaned in a little. Unfortunately, the moment didn't last for too long. "Doesn't change the fact that *he's* dangerous."

*Stubborn brat.* Groaning, Satoru pulled away and turned half toward Suguru. Absent-mindedly, he noted that Shōko was gone. There was something odd in the way that Suguru was regarding them. Closed off. "Fresh air?"

Honestly, he was surprised that no one else had come running, yet. Maybe they ought to get out before that; he was in no mood for an unnecessary scene.

"Of course, when do you ever listen?" Megumi muttered, annoyed. He had taken out his phone and was furiously typing on it.

Silently, Suguru slid up behind him, close enough that he could feel Suguru's breath fan warmly over the shell of his ear. "You know, he's not wrong."

"Yeah?" he huffed, exhausted. "Too bad that it doesn't matter. Do you wanna get out or not?"

Suguru turned him around by the shoulder, paused for a second, mouth twitching thoughtfully, before he pressed a firm, startling kiss to his lips. Just like that. "I'm not sure if your trust in me is endearing or dumb," he mumbled into it. Louder and with a quick peck to his lower lip, he exclaimed, "Let me clean up first."

At his back, Megumi made a strangled noise that could have been disgust or shock, Satoru wasn't sure – he felt too light-headed, in a *thrilling* way, to think on it.

## Chapter End Notes

- So, as you can see, I am slipping Tsumiki into the backdrop of this story. She is Megumi's sister and personally speaking, I'd love to see her having a relationship with Gojo too. It's not like Megumi was alone when Gojo "picked him up", after all. How



relevant she will be in here, though, remains to be seen since, honestly, the story focuses more on stsg and Geto finding even ground with the kids/school rather than tackling manga events. Also, I know it hasn't yet been confirmed that she's a vessel but let's pretend she is. (I have added some minor changes to the first chapter keeping Tsumiki in mind, though. Nothing grande that you'd have to re-read, just thought I'd mention it.)

- It feels like this story is turning into a slow-burn Geto-and-the-kids-warm-up-to-each-other rather than anything else xD I'm having fun with it, though!

- How could I not at least mention best big brother Choso. I love him so much.

- Look. I adore Gojo's relationship with the kids (I have my favs but that's neither here nor there, lol). And they will all eventually get that Gojo-comfort/hug. Maybe. Because they need and deserve it. But Megumi first (and Yuuji, sorta, but)! And it's so much fun to write this grumpy boy caught between stsg and just being. Done. (But he cares! Let him be a lil protective! Stop being offended by it, Gojo!)

- Writing this just showed me how much shit is actually going down in canon that Gojo will have to be told about. There's. So. Much. Where do you even start? And I haven't even touched on most of it yet. (Nanami?? I dread.) And that's only what happened on the day itself, God knows how long Gojo will be sealed for and how much more is going to happen until then. Big yikes D:

- Does Geto have petty energy here? Yes. Yes, he absolutely does. Utahime tried to warn the kids about what a nightmare stsg were. She truly did. Well, learning experience!

- Getwo... I have a love-hate relationship with Getwo. Let's keep him as this annoying presence in the back of Geto's mind for now. Shoko looking at the brain didn't go so well and triggered Getwo (Shoko needs a break and several drinks and Gojo's credit card) but Geto's got a good grip on his body. Right now, at least.

- I had some out-of-my-control issues while editing this (had a lil jump scare about losing half the chapter earlier), so I really hope there's nothing missing, lol.

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

Ah, I took my sweet time with this :p Between the stsg-week last month and an internship keeping me busy, I wasn't able to get around to this chapter sooner. And I'm sure it probably needs another reread or two, lmao, but I think I've let you guys wait long enough T\_T

Thanks once again for all the support <3 And I apologize if I haven't yet replied to a comment of yours - I'll try to catch up on all of them after this.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Is Gojō already rubbing off on you this badly? That was pathetically fast.”

Suguru watched blearily as the sugar cube – his *fifth*, added after a tentative sip of the scalding brewage – disappeared under the layer of white foam floating on top of his coffee. His head, too heavy for him to lift, had been ducked for so long that his neck was starting to ache as well. The pain piled up on top of the unbearable echoes of *screams* that were carved into his eardrums. Utahime’s voice was only aggravating him further.

“Maybe I just like sweet things.” He didn’t like them in particular. He didn’t dislike them either.

“There’s *sweet* and then there’s *sugar poisoning*.”

He hummed absent-mindedly and briefly glanced at Utahime’s disgusted face from across the cluttered counter before picking up his abandoned spoon to stir his coffee. The sweetness had drowned out the revoltingly bitter scent enough that his guts had stopped trying to crawl out of his throat.

Yet, the pungent tang from his accursed dreams and the sickening stench of bile kept fresh by its lingering ghosts still clung persistently to his tongue, a gooey film refusing to be washed away. And the longer it stayed, the more his insides curled in on themselves; the pain had forced him into a permanent hunch. Maybe Shōko could prescribe him something for stomachache... Or make him stop dreaming...

*Not exactly dreams though, are they?* Suguru lowered his head more until the tip of his nose was hovering a hairsbreadth above the cream foam and the steam fogged his vision. Somewhere in the farthest corners of his mind, a cacophony of amused chuckles grated against his already chafed nerves.

He was going insane, wasn’t he?

“God, you look squeamish. If you’re about to puke, then get out.”

“m not,” he murmured. He gripped his cup with trembling fingers and took a quick, experimental

sip. The sugar went straight into his teeth, rattling through them like nails over a cage door. But it also momentarily faded out every other flavor that had nestled into his tastebuds, allowing him a second of reprieve. Maybe Satoru had a point about the wonders of sugar.

“What’s wrong with you, anyway? And where’s your worse half?”

Suguru’s mouth curved up and he lazily hid his smile behind a cloud of steam. “*Satoru* should be around shortly. He’s thinking about having breakfast with everyone.”

“Trying to provoke a bloodbath? Sounds just like him.” Utahime put down her own mug with enough force that the drink within sloshed dangerously. It was a stark contrast to her carefully neutral demeanor. “I’m surprised that you managed to actually separate from each other!”

*Huh.* “Well, we live to surprise,” he humored her.

She grimaced in disgust. “Clearly. Causing the collapse of Japan? And then, daring to come back from the dead for him? You two are absolutely disgusting *and* shameless.”

“The Japan one wasn’t me,” Suguru defended listlessly between two gulps of too sweetened coffee. “Or Satoru,” he added thoughtfully.

“Indirectly.” And oh, any pretense of neutrality was crumbling out of her features now. “You two and your idiotic break-up and unresolved feelings were the root.”

Suguru mulled over her words. It was rather insulting that the most important and difficult decision of his life – turning his back on his own idealistic beliefs – was being brushed aside as a *break-up*. Had Satoru even been on his mind when he had finally settled on his choice? Before, during or after his first murder? The, admittedly shameful, answer was *No*. Back then, it hadn’t been about Satoru but Suguru himself.

He hadn’t even considered the *possibility* that Satoru, golden prodigy, evolving god, unaffected by mere human suffering, might have understood him.

Unbidden, he remembered how Satoru had clung to him that first night when he had been about to leave the infirmary. He could still feel the scorching imprints of Satoru’s fingers clutching his wrist. Hear his soft, “... *don’t*.” Remember how he had kept clinging on as if he were genuinely scared that Suguru might disappear as soon as he looked away.

*“If you’re going to leave, I’d like a notice in advance this time.”*

He rubbed his free knuckles over his throbbing chest and bit down on his tongue so that his expression wouldn’t waver. Suguru would never regret the path he had chosen, but perhaps he had made more mistakes along the way than he had realized.

So, *break-up* sounded a little cheap and, well. He loathed the implications, which was pathetic on his part, alright. But Utahime had a point. Everything that had transpired in Shibuya and beyond had been possible only because he and Satoru had fallen out while leaving a myriad of unaddressed feelings dangling over their lives.

While Suguru couldn’t care less about Japan, some of the damages...

“Is that your way to express your concern for Satoru?” Suguru wondered out loud tauntingly. Mockery came comfortingly easy to him. “How dare I have broken his heart?”

The fact that she didn’t explode immediately had him pause in mild surprise. She leaned forward,

both her hands spread wide on the counter, and squinted at him balefully. “*This* is my way of telling you that you fucked up and Gojō’s maybe dumb enough to accept you back *just like that*, but you better prove yourself trust-worthy.”

“Aw, would you look at that!” Suguru cooed, voice as sweet as the sugar dissolving on his tongue. “You *do* care about Satoru! What a good senpai you are!”

Apparently, that was as much self-restraint as Utahime possessed because the next moment, she launched over the counter furiously, sending water bottles and spices flying. “You little-!”

“Please, don’t kill him. I haven’t even finished treating him yet.”

Utahime snapped back as fast as she had lunged forward and almost toppled over her own feet in the process. Briefly, Suguru wondered whether the furious blush lighting up her cheeks was out of embarrassment, exertion or flusterment.

“Shōko!”

Suguru observed with amusement as Shōko walked past Utahime, unphased, and snatched her mug without asking for permission. Not that Utahime seemed to mind, she was too busy huffing and grumbling to herself. “Don’t let him rile you up so easily.” With an unimpressed glance toward Suguru, she added, “And don’t alienate people you’ll need in your corner.”

He shrugged innocently. “Does it even matter? Seems like everyone here’s on the higher-ups’ shit-list anyway.”

Shōko’s half-lidded gaze glimmered with interest. “So, you retained some of *his* memories, huh?”

“Sort of.” Shōko raised an eyebrow expectantly and while he was tempted not to elaborate, it didn’t take long for him to cave. He let go of his drink and folded his arms on the cool surface of the counter, resting his chin on top of it, and huffed out a tired breath, sending his bangs swinging back and forth. There was no winning against this woman. “Things he did and experienced with my body are clearer to me. But *previous* hosts...”

It was complicated.

Although the memories etched into his body *were* easier to access, he couldn’t quite grasp some tatters floating around aimlessly in his mind. Only pieces of incidents, as if he were looking at a low-quality screenshot of an unfamiliar video – *monstrosities that weren’t curses but appeared too mangled to be humans, a pair of legs with its upper half missing and shrouded in blood and ripped flesh, skies painted red*. Those weren’t *his* while still clinging to him, so he assumed that they belonged to curses which the imposter had not simply consumed but fully absorbed.

Suguru had always detested that part of his *Maximum Uzumaki*. What did he care about curses and their experiences in this world?

Then, there were those thick, sticky masses spread out across his mind like balls mindlessly strewn over a sports’ field. Foreign matters. If he stepped into one, it was akin to slowly getting sucked into quicksand without being sure whether that was actually sand or water or perhaps lava. He would startle out of the sensation with his brain wrapped in cotton and body feeling disjointed.

Earlier this morning, though... He had been snapped out of a restless sleep with the screams and wails of a woman ringing in his ears and the watery images of a shapeless curse smothering those screams under it.

“I think that half-curse... Chōsō? Might have triggered something.” Unwarranted and unpleasant.

Not that Suguru had actually met him beyond a brief, suspicious glance in passing the other day. But he knew *what* he had seen. He knew that the Brain had possessed Kamo Noritoshi in the past.

He wished he didn’t.

“That why you look like the dead walking?”

“The guy was up to some gross shit,” Suguru grumbled in his defense.

“Worse than mass murder?”

He flicked his attention toward Utahime, deadpan. “You’d be surprised, snowflake.”

“You sure you don’t want me to have another look?” Shōko asked, effectively cutting off whatever Utahime had been about to retort.

Suguru pulled back his lips into a grimace. It wasn’t that he didn’t want her to or that he didn’t trust her, but last time... He could have seriously hurt Shōko. He could have hurt *Satoru*. His insides coiled tightly at the thought, a wounded cobra hissing warningly. “Na.”

Shōko didn’t press the issue. “Satoru still sleeping?”

“Bathroom. I think.” He wouldn’t be surprised if Satoru had fallen back asleep though. “Why does he sleep so much anyway?” It wasn’t normal, was it? Rare as it was, Satoru had gotten sick in the past too and yet, his sleeping pattern had never changed because of that.

Shōko handed the mug to a disgruntled Utahime and stretched her arms, humming thoughtfully. “I think, with the irregular lack of cursed energy hitting him, his body’s catching up on all the exhaustion he’s been accumulating. Those eyes of his *are* a health hazard and he can’t use *Reversed Technique* on his brain right now.”

That... certainly explained a lot. Was it really bad, in that case? Satoru had always had trouble falling asleep. Suguru recollected many a night spent with Satoru tucked into his arms, trembling and whimpering and tearing at his own hair because he couldn’t bear the overstimulation. And all Suguru had been able to do was rub circles on his back and pray that exhaustion would knock him out.

Had he had similar episodes in the decade that Suguru had been gone?

“I’ll be...” He vaguely gestured toward the door before grabbing his coffee and leaving without another glance at them, stomach in knots.

As he hurried out the door, he brushed past a startled Kugisaki and a disgruntled *Zen’in* who moved out of his way with a sneer, absent-mindedly noting the burn scars marking her face as if death had personally carved its ink into her.

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“Getō-san!”

Suguru froze in front of the wooden staircase, muscles stiffening almost painfully. He considered

ignoring the brat and continuing on his way down rather than testing his patience. His insides were already maddeningly jittery, a restlessness he couldn't quite pinpoint somersaulting between his guts, and his body was *aching* with the need to find Satoru. For all that Utahime had mocked their inability to stay apart, Suguru had to admit that she hadn't been wrong.

Not that he cared much.

Unfortunately, Itadori Yūji was faster than Suguru's ability to make up his mind. The boy came to a skidding halt next to him, leaving a distance of three feet between them, hunched over his knees as he was catching his breath. Which was weird because Itadori possessed ridiculous physical prowess. What had he been doing before spotting Suguru?

He stared at the tips of Itadori's spiky hair and felt his intestines curl in on themselves.

"I'm glad I caught you! I've wanted to talk to you!"

*Obviously.* When he straightened up, Suguru's attention fixated on the scars – pale pinkish, stretched taut with tension, too jagged to properly blend into such youthful features. He couldn't help but also linger on the markings on Itadori's cheeks. The body-snatcher hadn't personally seen Sukuna take over Itadori and yet, it wasn't hard to imagine an extra pair of eyes glaring back at him as black ink stretched ominously over the boy's face, devouring the remaining proofs of Itadori Yūji's youth.

Even without either of those, Suguru could *taste* Sukuna in the air: bitter and pungent, scalding his tongue and stirring the bile in the back of his throat. As if the curse had draped itself over Itadori and was steadily melting into him.

How the kid was still clinging on to his own consciousness was beyond Suguru.

Itadori fidgeted under his scrutiny but remained rooted where he stood. Suguru raised an unimpressed eyebrow, silently prompting him to speak up already.

"I..." Itadori cleared his throat and raised a hand to his neck, gaze flickering nervously from Suguru to the floor and back. "I know that you don't like me much."

"Yeah?" Suguru scoffed. "I'm impressed because even *I* don't know how to feel about you."

There were traces of Sukuna carved into Itadori's features that tempted Suguru to pour his coffee over them and see whether they could be washed off. There were more solid bits of a boy – a child – visible whose helpless demands of, "*Give him back!*" still echoed faintly through his mind, tugging at the unhealed tears veining his heart. There was the vicious surge of resentment feeding the eager curses crammed into his guts. And there was Shōko's sharp reminder of how important Itadori was to Satoru buzzing in the back of his mind.

Mournfully, Suguru wished it were easy to hate him.

Bitterly, he wished that the human and curse were either physically separated or completely merged.

Itadori nodded as if he understood - *how ridiculous* - and continued, "I think sensei's worried about letting us interact."

"Astute observation," Suguru muttered sarcastically. Satoru was probably worried that Suguru would attack his precious student. Which wasn't a farfetched concern, to be fair, but Suguru wasn't going to stupidly hurt Satoru like this no matter his own emotional turmoil.

Itadori winced sheepishly. “Right. I... I’d like us to be at least civil with each other.”

“Or we could just ignore each other.” Frankly speaking, he would prefer that.

“We *could*.” The sharp edge to Itadori’s expression said otherwise. The boy stood a little taller, determined. “But I care for Gojō-sensei. And you’re important to him.”

How mature of him. Then again, Suguru was fully aware of how harsh life had been to Satoru’s kids during his sealing and maturing would have been unavoidable even for the most naïve of the lot. And the kid did have a point, loath as he was to admit it. Satoru cared for his students and since Suguru was planning to stick around, he wouldn’t be able to avoid them forever. They were too deeply ingrained into Satoru’s life, after all.

That didn’t mean that he had to like this prospect.

The air around them shifted slightly. It wasn’t obvious but there was a sinking foreboding that scraped over Suguru’s instincts that he couldn’t shake off.

“I know that-” Itadori nervously brushed his palms over his pants and hastily lowered his gaze but not fast enough for Suguru to miss the shame brimming in it. His posture fell and his determination crumbled. “Ieiri-san said that Sukuna- that he...”

Suguru felt a strong surge of annoyance spark somewhere in the cavity of his chest, so sudden and unexpected that it cut off his airways for a second. *Seriously?* Telling Satoru had been *one* thing. Going around and talking about him to these brats like a gossiping neighborhood aunty...

A snappy remark was already burning on the tip of his tongue that he almost choked on when Itadori, *without warning*, fell to his knees and bowed to prostrate himself with his forehead touching the ground.

What the fuck.

“I know it doesn’t mean much. And a simple *sorry* would be cheap. But I can’t undo what Sukuna did and that’s a regret I will carry with me until I die.”

Suguru stared down at him, mind blank.

How utterly foolish to make yourself this vulnerable in front of someone who had a reason to harm you. Maybe the time without Satoru *hadn’t* managed to erase all of Itadori’s childish naivety.

And what did he expect Suguru to do? A stupid *sorry* was as meaningless as trying to heal a severed limb by sticking a band aid on it and if the kid had dared to say it- He hadn’t, though. Suguru was- *what* was he supposed to do? Nothing Itadori said or could say would ever be enough.

His girls were gone, and worthless words weren’t going to magically bring them back.

*But Itadori didn’t kill them*, he reminded himself when his resentment started to sizzle in his blood - and forced the reminder to cycle on repeat through his head like a fervent incantation.

He exhaled slowly. Once, twice, thrice - until his resentment cooled down enough for him to blink away the haze that he hadn’t even noticed creeping up on him. Then, he turned fully toward Itadori, rolled his left shoulder to shake out tension and loosened his iron grip on his coffee.

“Did you let him take control?”

Itadori's head snapped up so fast that Suguru was surprised it didn't fly off. "Of course not!"

"Then I'm not sure why you're taking responsibility for someone else's actions."

There was a beat of stunned silence.

"Because *I* ate the first finger," Itadori said, although it sounded more like a question. "Sukuna incarnated because of *me*. His fingers started to cause trouble because of me. It's only right that I take responsibility."

Tendrils of chilling discomfort sprouted between the bones of Suguru's ribcage. "Is that why you became a jujutsu sorcerer?"

Itadori's fingers curled into trembling fists over his knees. "It's not something I could've turned away from with a clean conscience."

*Responsibility. Obligation. Duty.*

Hastily, Suguru downed half of his cup's content in a desperate attempt to wash away the itch steadily spreading through his throat. He prayed that he wouldn't throw it all up the very next moment.

*Focusfocusfocus.*

Sukuna. Sukuna's fingers. That was what they were talking about.

Itadori was feeling responsible for Sukuna's actions because he was his vessel. Which wasn't wrong on his part, but it wasn't completely right, either. Although, Suguru doubted that the kid would care much for technicalities. Even if outer forces had been trying to revive Sukuna and had specifically chosen Itadori as the vessel, no one had made Itadori to swallow that finger. No one but his own sense of morality, apparently.

What a wretched curse to bear.

"You know," Suguru said instead, careful to keep his tone even. "Satoru's birth threw the world into imbalance. It made curses *much* stronger than they used to be, like a chain reaction. Would you blame him for everyone dying to curses ever since?"

"No?!" He sounded so offended that Suguru almost laughed.

"See. Cause and effect aren't always as clear-cut as we think." It wasn't the same, of course. Satoru hadn't chosen to be born whereas Itadori had consumed Sukuna out of his own choice. The thought counted, though, right? "If not you, then someone else. Sukuna probably would have incarnated one way or another."

"But you hate me because of... well," Itadori murmured, nose scrunched up in confusion.

"I don't hate you - pay attention, kid." He would eventually decide whether he could tolerate the boy or not, but that wasn't going to be today. "All I'm saying is that if you get hung up over everything Sukuna does, then your life's going to be *really* miserable. It's short as it is."

Suguru had *willingly* murdered monkeys, had died once and still didn't regret those actions. There was no point in that, let alone letting someone else's sins crush you.

Itadori straightened into a crouch, threw his arms over his knees, and exhaled a long breath. "That



was surprisingly nice.”

Suguru rolled his eyes. “I’m not a complete monster.”

A wide grin lit up Itadori’s face. “Obviously not if Gojō-sensei loves you!”

What.

Suguru opened his mouth, baffled. But not a single sound came out.

He flinched in surprise when a hand crawled under his chin and tapped teasingly against it.

“That’s right!” Satoru chuckled, appearing next to him as if he had been standing there this whole time. “I knew Yūji would get it!”

“Gojō-sensei!” Itadori sprung to his feet hurriedly, beaming.

Satoru’s eyes were brimming with such an ensnaring intensity that Suguru physically *couldn’t* look away. “Yūji, we’re going to have breakfast. Fancy joining us?”

Itadori tilted his head thoughtfully. “Oh, I… In the cafeteria?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Sure! I’ll just see if Fushiguro’s hungry too.”

Satoru waved him off with an excited, “Hurry!”

---

“How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough.” Satoru weaved both his arms around Suguru’s left one and tugged him down the stairs. There was a small, pleased smile dancing on his lips that filled Suguru’s veins with thrumming warmth. It was ridiculous how time seemed to have left Satoru untouched – he looked so much younger than he was, especially when smiling like an excited child. “You know, you would’ve been a great teacher.”

Suguru blinked, startled out of his ogling. “What?”

“Teacher,” Satoru repeated. “I think you would’ve been a good teacher!”

Unbidden, he thought of Nanako and Mimiko and their terrible – *unnecessary* – fate and grimaced. “I doubt it.”

Satoru bumped into him playfully. “Why? You’re charming.”

Despite the sourness spreading underneath his heart, Suguru felt his mouth curve upward. “Yeah?”

“Don’t fish for compliments,” Satoru chuckled. “Everyone always liked you and I’m sure the students would have *loved* you! You probably would’ve been their favorite.”

“Over you?” he teased.

“Only because I’d let you,” Satoru scoffed in faux offense.

“Of course.” He shook his head, bangs bouncing with the motion, and sighed heavily, any lightness evaporating out of him. “But there’s more to being a teacher than just being loved.”

There was no doubt in his mind that the girls had loved him, and he had taught them as much as he had spoiled them. And yet, they had lost their lives like *that*. Surely, Suguru had lacked somewhere in his teachings and upbringing for Mimiko and Nanako to have considered bargaining with *Sukuna*. Either that or their blind devotion to him had been the *sole* reason of their doom - and he wasn’t sure which possibility hurt more.

Satoru’s students, on the other hand, had been gnawed at by death and spit back out with scars to show but their lives intact.

“I can tell your mind’s elsewhere,” Satoru murmured. One of his hands slid down the inside of Suguru’s arm until his fingers slipped between Suguru’s, warm and comforting. He pressed closer, a grounding heat lapping at Suguru’s side and keeping his thoughts anchored. “You did really well with Yūji is what I’m saying.”

Not that it had been his intention. “I just pointed out some facts.”

“Call it whatever you want, you grump!”

Abruptly, Satoru stopped as they were about to walk behind the staircase and bent sideways, curiously peeking at his coffee. Without warning, he grabbed Suguru’s wrist and took a generous gulp. He hummed in surprise, loud and excited, gaze lighting up. “Did you make coffee for me and ended up drinking it yourself?”

“Did you sniff out the sugar from all the way over there?” Suguru snorted, amused.

Satoru tilted his head upward and poked out the tip of his tongue at him. “How could I not?”

*Cute*. Suguru tugged him back up and pressed the cup into his free hand while moving his own to brush aside the fringes on his clammy forehead and rest his palm against it. Still warm but not downright hot.

Satoru leaned into the touch but his attention was somewhere else. “Why are there cracks in this cup?”

Suguru frowned in confusion. There, indeed, were some light cracks. “I didn’t notice.”

“Huh.” Satoru’s pursed his lips and idly grazed them over the rim of the cup. His features softened. “Yūji’s not so bad, is he?”

“Definitely not the worst you have,” Suguru admitted as Fushiguro Megumi and Okkotsu Yūta crossed his mind. *Especially* Fushiguro and that pathetic ghost of the past clinging to him. He would breach that topic with Satoru eventually but right now, he was too drained to think about anything else. “He’s still a little naive, don’t you think?”

Satoru was silent for a few moments before he sighed, deliberating blowing against Suguru’s bangs. “Well, I was worried about the opposite. He’s righteous to a fault.” His eyebrows pinched together, troubled creases forming between them, and his gaze glazed over. “He’s too good for this kind of life and I’m terrible with taking care of anyone’s mental health. It’s why I made Nanami look after Yūji,” he added wryly.

“Being self-conscious is a terrible look on you,” Suguru quipped, more so to derail his thoughts from falling headlong into the implications behind those statements. Not everything was about *him*.

“I’m self-*aware*, not self-conscious!”

“Whatever you say.” Suguru resumed their path toward the dining room, squeezing Satoru’s hand as tightly as he could without hurting. “I’d reckon that you being here already does wonders for their mental health.”

Suguru could see, after all.

Satoru laughed, light and airy. “Yūji’s right, you’re awfully nice these days!”

“Shut up.”

---

Something was wrong.

Suguru watched his hand carefully reach out for Satoru’s head lolling from his shoulder. It hovered over his face hesitantly before slowly settling on Satoru’s jaw, thumb brushing over his chin. Satoru’s eyelids fluttered twice but remained closed, although he leaned into the touch. Surprised relief flooded through his veins.

But *Suguru* couldn’t feel anything.

His vision was fuzzy and disjointed as if he were looking through a thick, fogged screen that had been put between him and the scene playing out in front of him.

No sounds reached his ears.

No feeling reached his nerves.

No movement registered in his brain.

He was not in control of his body.

The thought had barely formed when a jolt shot through him and suddenly, he was crashing through the screen, mind scattering, heart jumping between his chest and throat.

Satoru’s skin was startling soft under his palm.

The noises crashing down on him right after, senseless chatter and cutlery clinking against plates, drowned out his own deafening heartbeat almost completely.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he caught Okkotsu frowning at him - when had any of the brats gotten here? - but his attention slipped as soon as Satoru’s eyes flew up. His hazy gaze flickered left and right, up and down, restless, almost spooked, until it settled on Suguru and softened.

“What happened?”

Underneath the muffled cacophony of his erratic pulse, Suguru could pick up a myriad of

indecipherable murmurs and chuckles that floated into his blood like winter's first snowfall. Freezing. Distracting.

He pulled Satoru's head closer, pressed his right cheek to Satoru's left one and shakily inhaled the scent of sweet mint accentuated by a salty tang. His frayed nerves bristled for two more agonizing beats until a sense of calm swept over them and steadily lulled them into hazy tranquility.

Satoru's fingers carded gently through his open hair, the motions soothing him further.

"Suguru?"

"Nothing," he lied. "You were dozing off."

"So were you, Mister Pretentious."

He pressed his eyes shut tightly and smothered an annoyed groan underneath Satoru's ear. It earned him a surprised flinch and something, maybe Satoru's knee, rattling the table – effectively shattering his illusion of peace.

No, really. When had the brats joined them? And why were there *so many*? He could have sworn that students used to die like ants back in his day.

Now that sensation was returning to him, his temples were throbbing, and his stitches on fire, and he couldn't bear their voices.

"Could you two - *not*? We're trying to eat here!"

"We're not doing anything!"

"You're being gross. That's something!"

"So mean, Nobara."

Resigned, Suguru pushed himself away, though he didn't get far with Satoru's fingers entangled in his hair. He patiently endured Satoru's gaze, piercing even without his *Six Eyes*. The worry crawling into Satoru's features was an unpleasant sight, though.

"Are you in pain? Is it your head?"

"It's fine." It wasn't. "I think I just need to eat a little."

Past Satoru's shoulder, he noticed Itadori's curious look and wondered if that was how the kid felt with Sukuna. Fushiguro was sitting between Itadori and Satoru, squinting at him suspiciously. Chōsō next to Itadori was decidedly ignoring everything in favor of putting more rolled eggs on boy's half-empty plate. Kugisaki, Panda and Okkotsu were sitting on the other side of the set table and staring at them rather than eating.

There were other tables in the cafeteria...

Satoru let go of him hesitantly. "If you say so."

"He's a grown man, you don't need to coddle him."

Suguru blinked down at the trembling fists in his lap and unsuccessfully tried to swallow the annoyance rising in the cavity of his throat. He *shouldn't*- "None of you are, though. You want him to coddle *you* instead, Fushiguro?"

He didn't have to look to know that the brat was gritting his teeth and probably glaring daggers at him.

In front of him, Kugisaki snorted, amused, and immediately raised her hands in faux innocence. "Do you, Fushiguro?"

"Shut. Up."

"Scary~" Huh, maybe Suguru could like this one. "Oh, sensei! Look what I got you." She slid a neatly wrapped cupcake toward Satoru while beaming with smug satisfaction. "I didn't take a single bite this time!"

Suguru eyed Satoru as he eagerly unwrapped the cupcake as if it was a Christmas gift. "I hope you're aware that that's not breakfast."

"Food is food!"

Okkotsu leaned toward them and put down a plate full of egg rolls, a bowl of rice and sushi in front of Satoru. Kugisaki stuck out her tongue at him childishly at that. "You should try to eat more than that, sensei."

*They are like a terrible mix of enablers and mother-hens. Good grief.*

"I will, I will." Despite claiming that, Satoru not-so-subtly pushed the food to the side so that it was in the middle between him and Suguru. Maybe Suguru would have been a little more exasperated if his chest weren't bubbling with fondness. Or the scowl on Okkotsu's face weren't so satisfying.

"Where are Maki and Toge?"

"They weren't hungry," Panda replied. "And there's a lot to do here, so they might be busy."

Satoru scrunched up his nose in displeasure. "Too busy for their sensei? How cruel!"

Suguru remembered the burn scars. Perhaps, there was also something up with the Cursed Speech User... How long were they planning to keep Satoru in the dark?

"You know, talking of missing people," Satoru chirped into the ensuing silence, cheeks stuffed full and crumbs sticking to his chin. "I've been wondering! I've been back for a bit now and yet, Nanami hasn't visited. Where's that terrible kōhai of mine?"

Satoru had barely finished talking when temperature in the room dropped, the answer a bone-rattling chill in the air. Suguru felt his heart plummet into a sea of dread.

- I've been excited to write that Geto-Yuuji scene for a long time now! I don't know if the dogeza itself was a bit too much but I saw it like this: Yuuji cares for Gojo a lot and he's seeing (like everyone else) how much Gojo loves Geto and thus, he wants to at least try to get along. Finding out that the girls Sukuna killed in Shibuya were basically Geto's daughters would make him feel immensely guilty even without the aforementioned context. (And it's not like Shoko told him just because. Yuuji's not dumb, he'd pick up on the dislike and be curious about that. And Shoko's just trying to give a helping hand, lol.)

- Geto really doesn't hate Yuuji but it's not always easy to keep Yuuji and Sukuna separated. He's trying, though! And doing a pretty good job, if you ask me (and Gojo) :p

- He's probably also not completely wrong about Utahime caring but she'd rather swallow her tongue than ever admit to it, lmao.

- Since we haven't seen Maki post-Shibuya yet I have no idea if she does have any burn scars or not. But if she's still fighting for her life like it has been implied then her wounds must be pretty severe! So, scars...

- I have an unhealthy fascination with Brain, I'm sorry D:

- Nanami...

## Chapter 5

### Chapter Notes

It's finally here! \_(-ω-`\_) I think this is my longest chapter for this fic so far.

Thank you for 1k+ kudos! This fic started off as something very self-indulgent on my part, so you can imagine how surprised I was to see so many of you enjoying it <3

This chapter was a bit of a struggle (as I'll talk about more at the end), but I'm glad to finally get it out; I've been tinkering with it long enough and might go over it again later (don't want to stall any longer, lmao). Thanks for your support and I hope you'll "enjoy" this!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Satoru had seen and felt people die long before he had been able to understand the concept of death.

To him, cursed energies were like lanterns flickering in the night, constantly hovering at the edges of his consciousness and scraping against his awareness, varied close-up but all the same from afar. When someone died, their lantern went out, freezing shock washing over his nerves in its wake. Again, and again and again, uncountable times ever since he could think until all that remained was numb apathy.

People were born. People lived. People died.

Grief. Pain. Mourning – nothing but abstract notions slipping right through his frozen awareness and far out of his reach. He had never learned to care. Or maybe he had taught himself not to care without understanding what he was doing.

But then, he had joined the jujutsu tech on a stubborn whim.

Death crawled from the edges jarringly close to the center of his orbit.

He had died. Riko had died. Haibara had died.

*Suguru* had.

Somewhere along the way, those unreachable abstracts had thawed from their prisons and buried themselves into his very soul, jagged and sharp, twisting and twisting deeper and carving bloody imprints.

Right now, those old marks flared to life as the blood of new ones splashed over them. His insides were alight, and the fumes clogged his throat and burnt against his eyeballs.

“Ah,” he breathed, into the damning silence, slow and shaky, as realization cracked into his bones. He flicked the crumpled wrapper of his muffin across the table and watched it hit Nobara’s knuckles, tumbling to an unsteady halt and being squashed by her small finger as she curled her hand into a fist. The last bite was stuck in the in his throat like a thick pebble, dry and painful. His heart was beating so slowly that he wondered if it was fighting a complete stillstand.

Of course. It made sense. Shōko and Yaga, despite wanting to lay low for the time being, wouldn’t have hidden the current situation from *Nanami* and Nanami, more concerned under that stoically annoyed façade of his than he would ever admit, would have already been here – *if he could be*. If not to scold Satoru for his carelessness, then for Suguru, surely. Either out of sentiment or because of past regrets, but he *would* have wanted to see Suguru.

“*There’s something I said to him the last time we spoke,*” Satoru remembered vividly Nanami confessing to him over a half-empty glass of vodka once in the hazy phase right after Suguru’s death. “*I would’ve liked to take it back, if given the chance. But we all live with regrets, don’t we?*”

Liar.

No.

That wasn’t fair.

Satoru should have noticed his absence much sooner. Why hadn’t he? And why had *no one* told him? Not even Yūji? He didn’t get it. *What* exactly were they worried about enough to keep *secrets* like *this* from him?! He was physically compromised but not made of glass that he-

A hand squeezed his left shoulder, grounding and gentle, and Suguru’s warmth buzzed against his side, jerking him out of his spiraling thoughts. Satoru glanced at him, lingering on the uncertain twitching of his lips before he locked gazes. The reflection of his own turmoil staring back at him had him draw a rattling breath that scorched through his tender lungs. He hastily looked away lest his windpipe was crushed under the weight and instead, stared expectantly into the round.

The kids pretended as if they didn’t notice, Megumi and Yūji too busy with *not* eating their food, Nobara swirling an empty glass under her palm and Yūta and Panda pointedly staring at the tabletop. Seriously. He really ought to teach them how to act convincingly, at some point. They were *terrible*. Or just helplessly caught between not wanting to lie about something so important and - what? Not wanting to *hurt* him?

It wasn’t their job to look out for his well-being or feelings. It never should be.

He moved his mouth soundlessly a few times, getting rid of the tremors and making sure that none of the chaos raging within him would leak out, and asked, “Shibuya?”

Tension crept into the quiet. Then, “Satoru, maybe you-”

“Did it happen in Shibuya?” he cut off Panda, more harshly than was warranted. Panda didn’t even flinch, though. He just sighed, a mix of resignation and exasperation, and remained quiet.

Satoru was starting to hate these oppressive silences. The fact that they were charged with knowledge that everyone here was privy to and yet, refused to share with him was steadily chafing away at his patience.

“I’ve been kept in the dark for long enough already, don’t you think? It’s not like there’s any merit to keeping secrets.” He had been fine with them not telling him things, at first. His attention had



been otherwise occupied, anyway. But *this* was *not* okay. “Did Nanami die in Shibuya?”

Megumi caved first, although his gaze remained fixated on Yūji’s hunched over form rather than Satoru and one of his palms was resting on Yūji’s thigh. Satoru didn’t miss the trace of shame flickering over Yūji’s features and felt his heart drop. “Yes. That patch-”

“*Mahito*,” Yūji hissed, interrupting Megumi. “Mahito got to him. I wasn’t fast enough to save him.”

“It *wasn’t* your fault,” Megumi said sharply, his expression wary as if this was a conversation that they had had a lot. Satoru wondered if Yūji even heard him; he wasn’t reacting. “And before that, he was already heavily injured.”

The patch-face curse...

“Megumi’s right,” Satoru found himself murmuring, barely hearing himself over the rush of his own blood. Suguru’s grip tightened a little.

Satoru blinked down at where his hands were twisted into his lap. In front of him, he could see the images of opening train doors, the screeching sounds of metal grating against metal ringing in his ears, and masses of deformed, unrecognizable humans flooding out. Pitiful. Grotesque. Abhorrent.

His guts churned, turning in on themselves, bile crawling up his throat.

Had Nanami turned into something like *that* before his death? Reduced to something so pitiful and helpless? Had the shock of the transformation killed him?

That curse had been right in front of Satoru. He could have killed it – had the chance to. All he had to do was cast his *Unlimited Void* and the whole fight would have been over in an instant. But the people at the station... He had been so focused on keeping damages to a minimum while trying not to linger on the growing body count. How laughable in retrospect. Had anyone from that station even made it out alive? Had his consideration been worth *anything*?

Had Nanami died because Satoru, in a show of - what had the imposter called it? *Awkward* consideration that no one would expect of *him*, had *failed*? And for nothing, in the end? They hadn’t gotten the *Prison Realm* back then, after all. Nanami had died with failure haunting him.

Megumi was right. It wasn’t Yūji’s fault. It couldn’t have been, not when *Satoru* had set them up for loss.

“I’m...” He pushed his chair back, its legs scraping loudly over the floor, and got up on trembling legs, eyes burning and the world around him spinning. He waved them off when he saw that Yūji, Megumi and Yūta were about to get up as well and sharply turned away, Suguru’s warm hand gliding off his arm.

No one tried to stop him, and he was grateful for that.

Behind his sticky eyelids, the masses of deformed humans - *looking more like curses, desperately reaching for him, begging* - melted into the image of Nanami, standing strong and proud and slowly dissolving into a gooey puddle of blood and bones.

---

Satoru heard steps approaching him, but it took his fuzzy mind a split second too long to recognize that it was Suguru. Of course, it was. His chin resettled on top of his folded arms and he curled forward, the soles of his feet tilting brink of the step that he was sitting on.

He almost scooted aside to make room before remembering that the stairs were wide enough to fit several people at once. When Suguru sat down next to him, he slotted their sides together as if this was the only space he could fit into, and remained quiet.

Satoru didn't look away from the cloudy sky, though he could feel Suguru's gaze dancing all over him and wondered what exactly Suguru was observing. The cracked shards of his composure? The wetness clinging to his lashes but refusing to spill over?

How was *Suguru* feeling about this whole situation? Nanami had been in his second year when Suguru had left. And Suguru had been closer to Haibara, mostly because Haibara had stuck to Suguru like an affection-starved puppy whereas Nanami, well, had been *Nanami*. Yet, whenever the topic of Suguru would come up - which had been admittedly rare due to Nanami's occasional clumsy sense of regard for Satoru - Nanami's voice used to be tinged with begrudging respect and sometimes, wistfulness.

They had been together in the wake of Haibara's death, Satoru knew as much.

"Why are you sitting out here?"

Satoru dragged his chin over his folded arms until his right cheek was resting on them now, so that he could stare up at Suguru, heavy-lidded. His expression was indecipherable, annoyingly enough, but what caught Satoru's attention was the *heat*. It was welling up in his side, where they were touching, rattling his sluggish mind into hyper-focus. *Suguru was alive*. One thing that Shibuya had given him. And yet, the many sacrifices it had demanded in return...

How come his equivalent exchange turned out to be so inequivalent?

"Satoru?"

He closed his eyes for a beat, mentally chiding himself for being so easily distracted. When he opened them again, Suguru's face was slightly pinched in concern and underlined by silent understanding. It was endearing and unsettling at once, Satoru realized, startled. So... rusty in its familiarity. He hadn't expected that it would take him time to fully get used to *this* - to have *all* of Suguru back.

After Suguru, had anyone *looked* at him like this?

"Fresh air," he mumbled belatedly. Indoors, the walls had been closing in on him, suffocating. It was stupid because the infirmary building was spacious, and yet - it had felt as if his lungs were about to burst, anxiety filling them and choking him.

Sympathy flashed over Suguru's features, tinged with clearer worry. He didn't prod, though. "What were you thinking about?"

"Remember that senior who died at the start of our first year?"

Suguru frowned for half a split second before the corner of his mouth tugged upward in dampened mirth. "The guy whose friends refused to leave behind his body and were almost killed because of that? You were *terrible* to them. What did you say?"

"*The corpse isn't going to thank you dumbasses for being utter morons,*" Satoru recited, the words

tasting shockingly bitter on his tongue - a stark contrast to the fondness bubbling in his chest at the sight of Suguru's tiny smile. It was so soft, especially under the faint orange sunlight, that peeked out shyly behind the dark clouds and caught on Suguru's hair, the bridge of his nose and the curve of his lips.

"You also ended up mangling the body and Shōko gave you an earful about your poor job of disposing of it."

"I wasn't trying to *dispose* of it," he muttered sourly. It had just ended up in the crossfire. Satoru's control over *Limitless* had been... questionable, then.

Suguru hummed doubtfully. Then, without any warning, he tugged at Satoru's sleeve and nudged him insistently until Satoru uncurled from his position and sat up straight, legs dangling off the stairs. Wordlessly, Suguru reached for his left hand while winding his arm around Satoru's back and engulfing his other hand as well. He pressed the palms together, rubbed them slowly against each other, his own rough palms keeping them cocooned in warmth, and leaned forward, long strands falling spilling over his shoulders in tandem, to gently breathe over them.

Each puff of warm breath had heat tingling through his veins and flooding his erratic heart.

Satoru stared at him, dumbfounded. He hadn't noticed *how* cold it was; his exposed skin was glowing red, his fingers were numb, and he was trembling, frost settled into his limbs. Maybe he should have thrown a jacket over his sweater. But Suguru wasn't wearing one, either...

"I remember that I was shocked by your blockheaded insensitivity."

"You already didn't like me much," Satoru forced out past the steadily growing lump in his throat. Not that Satoru could fault him, their first meeting had been a disaster because Satoru couldn't keep his mouth shut and ended with them both bruised and battered. But in his defense: he hadn't had any proper or regular contact with kids his age before entering the school and they had been such a bother to navigate. How could he have known that Suguru's bangs were a sensitive topic?

Suguru paused, lips brushing over skin, scorching over jittery nerves, as he spoke next, "I wouldn't say so. You just... had a pretty face but such an awful attitude. I thought it was a shame."

"You thought I was pretty *then*?"

"Why are you acting so surprised," Suguru snorted. Though, he didn't wait for a reply, "As I was saying, there's being *rude* and there's being *insensitive*. I'd never met someone so callous about death before."

Satoru winced internally. Well, fair enough. "It's not like that was my first time seeing someone die. It just didn't make sense to me how death could-" He faltered, unsure how to *explain*. As much sense as it made in his mind, words failed to grasp that same sense. "How anyone could be attached to the dead." Maybe it was karma that had haunted him years later.

"Does it make sense now?"

Satoru's heart twitched, curling and shrinking in on itself like a wounded animal trying and failing to protect itself from harm.

Sometimes, rarely, when exhaustion forced his brain into blissful quiet, its recesses would conjure the weight of a small, stiff body in his arms and peel apart his chest to expose a hollow void ready to devour it. Sometimes, it was the morgue and Shōko cremating Haibara, the disgusting smell of decomposing human and burning flesh ghosting in his nose and the sounds of bones cracking

echoing through his ears.

Suguru's absence had, regardless of exhaustion, been a grey tint veiling his vision, clinging stubbornly to the frayed fringes of his awareness, and perpetually clawing at his soul.

*Now?* It had started to make sense over a decade ago.

“Unfortunately. I think I preferred it when I didn’t care about how many people and who died.”

Suguru's grip on his hands tightened ever so slightly, heat simmering within the dark eye that was peering up at him. “Yeah?”

*No. Maybe.*

He opened his mouth, unsure what to say, when-

His vision flared – growing dizzyingly sharp, bright lights dancing at its edges and singing the nerves in the back of his mind. He gasped; the vertigo hit him so unexpectedly that he almost lurched forward. Suguru's grip jerked, startled, probably saving him from toppling over the flight of stairs.

When he looked down at him, he was sucked in by the tangled, twitching mess in the center of Suguru's stomach, its freezing tendrils spread throughout Suguru's body like tentacles and scraping against Satoru's charcoaled nerves. He was spit back out as abruptly as Suguru's appearance started to become more *Suguru* than cursed energy.

*Shit.* The force of his *Six Eyes* switching on was crushing his guts into mush.

Satoru fell forward, Suguru wobbling under the extra weight, and buried his face into Suguru's hair, inhaling his familiar, soothing scent shakily. The dizziness ebbed away as fast as it had appeared, but his limbs still felt like noodles – boneless and limp. His insides were on fire that kept licking at every organ it touched, and he couldn't tell whether it was a result of his *Six Eyes* or the remainder of his grief.

“Your eyes?”

“Hmm. 's not that bad.”

Suguru adjusted under him to also wrap both his other arm around Satoru, stabilizing them both. He carded one hand carefully through Satoru's hair, his fingernails gently massaging his scalp. “Liar.”

Satoru let his face slide into the crook of Suguru's shoulder and pressed his closed eyes against warm skin. They only burnt stronger.

He would take the bouts of weakness resulting from his messed up cursed energy over – *this*: His insides corroding under the acidic waves of regret, his ribcage rattling with each breath and the flames lapping at his stuttering heart.

Being indifferent to death didn't hurt, at least.

“Nanami shouldn't have died.”

Rationally, Satoru knew that sorcerers had to be prepared to die at any moment. Nanami had known too, of course - that harsh reminder was what had driven him away all those years ago, after

all. Regardless, he had returned to this lifestyle out of his own free will, determined and accepting the risks. But Satoru wasn't sure if he had ever made his *peace* with any of this.

Ever since high school, Nanami had never been *complete*. His demeanor, the way he had carried himself, his concern for the children, his avoidance of the past – they all spoke of something missing. He had returned to this grueling line of work with an old wound still bleeding after his every step. The mere thought of him dying while standing in the bloody seas of the past...

Suguru's hand moved toward his nape, fingers curling and uncurling soothingly, sending sparks of warmth down his spine. "It's not your fault, you know?"

Was it not? Nanami wouldn't have been in Shibuya if not for Satoru and his carelessness.

How come anyone had been *forced* to save *him*?

Gojō Satoru, the strongest jujutsu sorcerer alive. Ridiculous. What was the worth of that strength?

"It's *not*," Suguru repeated firmly as if hearing his thoughts.

Even if it weren't – which it *was* – the fact that Satoru was grateful that the Shibuya mess had returned Suguru to him despite everything else was abhorrent, wasn't it? Everything that had happened, his regrets a steadily growing pile of garbage in the spaces of his soul, and yet, he couldn't bring himself to disregard the outcome. What if he hadn't been caught off-guard and sealed? Would Suguru have found a way back, regardless? Satoru had no idea, and it didn't even matter *but*–

Tentatively, he touched Suguru's chest, remembering how a hole had been here not that long ago – how *he* had made it – and now, a heart was beating against his palm. Strong. Steady.  
*Alivealivealivealive.*

"Nanami deserved to live." As did Suguru's girls. As did all the people caught up in Shibuya. But so did Suguru.

Life was never about fairness or whatever anyone deserved or didn't deserve.

"I know."

"He didn't even like being a sorcerer," Satoru continued, voice cracking.

"And yet, he came back to be one."

*Yeah.*

Satoru pulled away slightly and looked up, vision watery and blurry. He reached for some strands of black hair and brushed them behind Suguru's ear, lingering. Quietly, he whispered, "What did you talk about when you last spoke?"

Suguru frowned, caught off-guard. "Why?"

"He wanted to take back whatever he said to you."

"Ah." Suguru's mouth quirked into a smile that seared right through Satoru's chest. "And he never told you what it was?"

Not that Satoru had tried to get it out of him. He might be annoyingly persistent if he wanted something, but there were things even he didn't try to breach. "Na."

“Don’t worry about it, then.” The smile turned playful, albeit with a somber note to it. “Guess you two did become good friends, huh?”

“I guess,” he snorted. “He never respected me, though.”

“Sounds like Nanami, alright.” Satoru almost flinched when he felt something prod against his cheek. Suguru’s thumb. *Ah, damn.* Was he crying? He hadn’t noticed. Sometimes, he forgot that he could do that. “If it’s any consolation, Mahito’s gone.”

It wasn’t. That only meant that there was no target for the fury simmering in the pit of his stomach and all he could do was let his scald through him.

Suguru pinched the skin underneath his right eye, lips pursed chidingly. “Self-blame isn’t a good look on you.”

“You’re awful,” he grumbled half-heartedly.

“God, why are you two idiots like that? Rooms exist for a reason.”

To their credit, they didn’t startle. As if materializing out of thin air, Shōko appeared behind Suguru, walked a step below them and slid down the wall so that she could face them both. Suguru hastily wiped over both of Satoru’s cheeks before Satoru could even react. Shōko quirked an unimpressed eyebrow at that but didn’t comment. Instead, she placed two bottles between them, let one of her legs slid off the edge of her step and pulled the other to her chest and removed the cigarette stump from her mouth, carelessly throwing it away.

Satoru scrunched up his nose at the sake, ignored the water, and glared at her. “You should’ve told me about Nanami.”

“I suppose,” she admitted, wincing ever so slightly. “I just didn’t think that it was a good idea to overwhelm you with too much at once.”

He clicked his tongue in annoyance. “I’m not made of glass!”

Shōko regarded him slowly, attention lingering on his eyes for a bit too long, and nodded. “I never said you were.”

“Guys,” Suguru cut in-between, tone chiding. Which wasn’t fair, Satoru wasn’t in the wrong here!

Shōko sighed, grabbed her alcohol, and waved it in the air. “Let’s drink to Nanami. And I’ll answer your questions. How does that sound?”

“Long overdue,” he huffed.

Suguru leaned forward and took the water bottle, inclining his head agreeably.

---

Satoru left Suguru and Shōko to their vices, although he was sure that Suguru only stayed behind to give him some space, and went to look for his missing students.

The restlessness itching underneath his skin was driving him mad, making it impossible to stay

still, and if he wallowed in his own regrets any longer, they would start to consume him. And he needed to clear his head, too full of information that he hadn't fully processed; it was *a lot*, and he wasn't sure where to start – his own laughable exile from the jujutsu world, the uncountable malevolent sorcerers having been let loose all over Japan, beings from a millennia ago lurking in the country, Tengen, Kenjaku- *everything*. He didn't have the energy to pick through it all.

Besides, he hadn't seen Maki and Toge yet and after Shōko's mention of their injuries...

But instead, he found Nobara slumped against Maki's door, breathing heavily and her forehead pressed against the back of the hand that was gripping the doorknob. She was clutching the left side of her face, blunt nails digging into flesh in what *had* to be painful, and her breathing was too fast and short.

He was at her side in an instant, dread twisting his guts into a tangled mess and his pulse buzzing in his tongue achingly, paralyzing it for a smidge too long.

*What's wrong?* He wanted to ask and maybe he did, he wasn't sure.

He had barely breached her personal space when Nobara jerked away, almost smacking his jaw in the process. She glared at him, her back pressed flat against the wooden door, expression contorted into a mixture of embarrassment and annoyance. "*Goddamn*," she exhaled and pursed her lips into a tight, annoyed line. "Why're you sneaking up on me like that?!"

"What's wrong?" Satoru repeated urgently.

"Nothing!" Nobara didn't remove her hand from her covered eye and when she noticed him pointedly staring at it, she huffed out an exasperated groan. She pushed herself forward and straightened up, shoulders tensed, and chin raised stubbornly. "It's nothing, really." More quietly and with a grimace accompanying it, she added, "Just phantom pains."

"Doesn't sound like nothing to me." Satoru carefully reached out, waited a beat to see if she had any objections, and removed her hand to regard the dark eyepatch and the faint half-moon marks underneath it critically. "Would you mind if I took that off?"

For a split second, Nobara's composure fell in on itself, revealing traces of apprehension that she was quick to cover up. "It's not a pretty sight, okay?"

Satoru held back on a snarky remark, fully aware that this wasn't a good time. If she didn't want him to see, then she didn't want him to see. "Does Shōko know?"

Nobara broke free from his loose grip and crossed her arms in front of herself. It was probably supposed to be intimidating but came off as defensive. "It's not a big deal."

Impatience stirred in the back of his mind. "It clearly is if you're hurting."

"I've had worse!"

"That's not the point here."

"It's *my* point!"

"Noba-"

"I was dead."

Satoru flinched back as if she had just punched him, blood freezing in his veins. “What?”

“I was *dead*,” Nobara repeated, though she sounded less confident now, and waved her hand in the air as if that explained anything. “Well, at least that’s what Ieiri-san and everyone else keeps telling me. So, I’ve definitely had worse.”

Shōko *hadn’t* mentioned that part to him. Satoru raised an eyebrow skeptically. “You look very much alive to me.” *Thankfully*.

“Obviously,” she snorted. “Guess I was too stubborn to actually kick the bucket.”

Satoru swallowed past the lump of anxious nerves spasming in the crevice of his throat. She was very blasé about the whole thing. As if it didn’t matter. As if it hadn’t affected her. Despite that, she wasn’t as good at hiding herself as she believed. Or maybe Satoru simply recognized the pattern.

Out of his three first-years, Nobara was mentally the strongest. Of course, neither Megumi nor Yūji were *weak* by any means and they all had their own strengths. But those two were more easily swayed by emotion, more prone to hesitation and doubt. Nobara, though, was steadfast in her convictions, quick to adapt to situations no matter what was thrown at her and efficient enough not to let her regrets poison her. Just the right amount of crazy while never forfeiting her rationality.

Sometimes, when seeing the determination etched into her very soul, Satoru felt as if he were looking into a mirror – and he wasn’t sure what to make of that.

He knew how to handle Megumi. He knew how to handle Yūji. Nobara was different.

And yet... He noted the slight tremors in her curled lower lip, saw the doubts lurking at the edges of her gaze and the tension straining her posture.

A child was a child.

“Did Shōko save you?”

Nobara moved back, turning away from him a little, and shrugged. “She helped. But... I did. *Reversed Cursed Technique*. Honestly, I’m not too clear about how or what I did – I never tried to learn it. Not that I’m complaining!”

And didn’t that sound eerily familiar. Although Satoru had been very conscious about what he had been doing when he had dragged himself out of death’s clutches. He contemplated this for a moment, unsure whether he should comment on this or not, before conceding, “That’s how I figured it out too.”

Nobara scrunched up her nose in disbelief. “Healing yourself? What, how? By *dying*? *You*?”

Satoru cracked a wistful smile at her befuddlement. “Is it *that* shocking?”

“Well, you’re...” She trailed off, scrutinized him from head to toes. He had no idea what it was that she saw, but the tension seeped out of her and made way for exhaustion to settle into the lines of her face. “I suppose not.”

“It happened twelve years ago,” he explained easily. Absent-mindedly, he wondered whether Megumi would like to hear this story now, too. “I can’t heal anyone else, though.”

“Neither can I,” Nobara huffed. “And Ieiri-san can’t explain for shit.”



That dragged out an airy laugh from him. “She’s an awful teacher.” More seriously, he asked, “Does *anyone* else know about your phantom pains?”

And just like that, she tensed up again. “Of course not. What’s the point? They’re not even that bad!”

“The point is that the others would want to know. There’s no reason to suffer silently.” Suguru had only found out that Satoru’s eyes could take a serious toll on him during a mission – his glasses had broken early into a fight, they had ended up being stuck on the job for almost two days and Satoru had been too stubborn to tell Suguru that every single second was agony because his brain was being fried. The ensuing fight had been no fun, but much worse had been Suguru’s misplaced guilt over Satoru not deeming him trust-worthy enough to confide in him. “And you should see if Shōko has meds for you.”

“Ugh, what’s with you and behaving like an old man, giving out stupid advice like this?”

Rude. “I’m just *saying*.” He pointed at himself. “My eyes can be really troublesome sometimes. But Suguru always knows how to help. There’s nothing wrong with relying on your comrades!” God, if Suguru or Shōko heard him talking like this, they would have a field day. Then again, neither of them had a great rapport with allowing themselves to be vulnerable in front of others and how had *that* ended?

Nobara gasped dramatically, looking scandalized and intrigued at once. “Are you bragging about your boyfriend to me?”

*Boyfriend*. Satoru’s heart fluttered, each beat sending a tingle of warmth through his system. He pushed that sensation into the back and impulsively, barely registering his own actions, placed a hand on top of her head and pulled her forward until her forehead rested against his chest. She didn’t complain or resist, surprisingly enough. Though, there was a hitch in her breath that he tried not to linger on.

“If you’re in pain, then you should say so. There’s nothing tough about trying to hide it.”

A beat of an awkward, stunned pause followed.

“Well, *you* know,” she eventually grumbled, resigned.

“By chance,” he snorted.

“Fine, fine. I’ll *think* about it.”

Better than nothing. He could live with that. “By the way, your eyepatch’s kind of plain, wouldn’t you agree?”

He could feel the excitement radiating off her as she pulled away to smirk at him. “Are you offering to go shopping?”

Was that even possible with Japan’s current situation? Either way. “Sure.”

Her smirk grew mischievous. “Sensei, I think your boyfriend’s doing you good!”

Satoru flicked her forehead, making sure to reel in his – currently stable, even if little – cursed energy. “*Please*, I’ve always been generous!”

“Suuuure!” Nobara skipped out of his face, laughing. She didn’t seem to be in any pain right now.

“What’re you doing here, anyway?”

Right. “I was looking for Maki and Toge. Shōko told me about their injuries.”

She sobered up instantly. Guilt flickered over her face. “Ah... We should’ve told you sooner. About that and - Nanami-san.”

His throat tightened painfully. Yeah, they should. But Satoru’s initial anger over this had long since evaporated.

“I don’t know where Maki-” Nobara cut herself off, frowning at something behind him.

Satoru almost jumped when something heavy draped itself over his back. A cold nose grazed his nape, eliciting goosebumps down his arms, and his startled heart soothed over with recognition.

*Oh.* He hadn’t realized that his cursed energy had fizzled out.

“You took too long,” Suguru murmured into his skin.

Had he? He furrowed his eyebrows in puzzlement. It hadn’t felt *that* long.

Confused, he turned in Suguru’s grip, his gaze lingering on the stitches first – there was a red sheen to them that hadn’t been there before. Was it because of the cold? They *had* sat on those stairs for quite some time. What truly unsettled him, though, was the haze clouding Suguru’s dark eyes.

“Did you drink?” He hadn’t touched the alcohol when Satoru had been there, but...

Suguru blinked as if processing the question only slowly, the motions sluggish. But the haze started to dissipate, replaced by sharp alertness. He loosened his grip around Satoru’s torso and shook his head. “No. My head’s just killing me.”

“Shōko-”

“Can’t help.”

Nobara cleared her throat loudly. “Sensei, I’ll let Maki-san and Inumaki-senpai know that you want to see them!” She was gone before Satoru could thank her, though not without throwing a curious glance at Suguru.

He raised an arm and rapped his knuckles over Suguru’s forehead, conscious not to touch the stitches. “Are you *really* okay?”

Suguru nodded against his shoulder. “Let’s take a stroll?”

Satoru had no idea how that was going to help if Suguru was suffering a headache, but he agreed regardless. Maybe he was also overwhelmed by the amount of information they had received.

Yet, seeds of worry stirred in the depths of his stomach.

## Chapter End Notes

- I think it was hard for me to find an appropriate ground for Gojo's mental state and balancing this out with Nanami's importance to him. Like, Gojo's not expressively emotional, he wouldn't have a loud (sobbing) break-down (at least, not easily) - it'd be more silent. Feelings spilling over without him fully realizing. Him struggling to process his grief while not wanting to wallow in it. The self-blame clinging to the back of his mind. Things need to be done. It's tricky :/

- I have so many thoughts on the Six Eyes, lmao. For this chapter, it's something I've been thinking about ever since the information came out that even with his eyes closed/covered, Gojo sees cursed energy. I'd imagine that when someone dies, their cursed energy goes out too. And he'd know it (probably up to a certain range). Growing up with that could not have been fun...

- Yuuji&Gojo: It's my fault. || Megumi&Geto, exasperated: ffs! - But don't tell them, they'd hate to know that they do have some things in common! :p

- How much canon am I incorporating into this? Did the culling games happen? Did they not? Who knows, I'll leave it up for interpretation (it doesn't really matter, tbh. All background noise!). I just wanted to name-drop Kenjaku, is all. Because - we have a NAME, finally, and I have to express my feelings over that. Plus, I loved the last chapter (145), so! :p As for everything else that has been happening in the manga. Well, let's just hope that poor Geto won't tap into the memories that Kenjaku gathered while in the body of Yuuji's mom ° ( ° ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ° ) °.

- Nobara&Gojo! We deserve more Nobara and Gojo content. I love to emphasize how much Nobara's like Gojo (personality wise, you especially see it when she's fighting) and it's interesting to think about whether that would make it easier or harder for him to teach her. Either way, she's all in sensei's corner! Very supportive! Even if she can do without his old-man wisdom and isn't eager to see the PDA, lmao.

- I was going to end this chapter on a different note (with Maki included) but it was already so long. Alternatively, I considered cutting out the Nobara part and putting it into the next chapter, but that would've messed up my pacing and it just. Fits in here. On that note, if I had to make a tentative estimation, I'd say that there might be 2-3 more chapters left (but don't take my word for it. While I do have the ending mapped out, I tend to... add... and stretch... so, we'll see, lmao) - but Maki and Inumaki are also going to get a little screen time, eventually! Maki especially has some - opinions on Geto, lol.

- I think one of the most enjoyable parts of writing this is the bits and pieces of stsg's past that I can sprinkle in and just leave to your imagination. I looove to think about their early years, how they might have gotten close, learned to be vulnerable with each other - the happy times!

- I'm not sure when I'll post next (I always try within a month but, lol) but until then! Thanks for reading :)

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Notes

I'm back with another chapter, finally! ☺ It got a bit longer than planned but isn't that the story behind almost all of my stories... Btw, if any of you hasn't seen it yet, this story had a prequel now! Not much but maybe still worth a ready :p

More at the end. Please, enjoy the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Suguru should have told Satoru about that parasite continuously clawing at his consciousness and slipping through his cracks of inattention. He *knew* that he should have.

Maybe during their stroll when Satoru's fingers weaved between his own, a steady pulse of anchoring warmth. Maybe during Shōko's check-up when he waited patiently, kneeling behind Satoru with his forehead pressed between Satoru's shoulder blades. Maybe during the night when they were cocooned in layers of blankets and body heat and hushed silence, unable to sleep and unwilling to shatter the chilly, grief-drenched quiet. Or in the morning when they were too lethargic to get up, limbs entangled, the world outside yet to wake.

He should have.

He couldn't bring himself to.

Not with that heavy atmosphere already bearing down on them, bitter and gut churning. Not when Satoru was scrambling to piece together a believable mask of composure that didn't quite fit his face at the edges.

Being within the walls of the school was a momentary reprieve that was bound to break soon, anyway. He wasn't eager to add any more burdens – or misplaced guilt – than were already piling up on Satoru's shoulders.

Not yet.

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“How much longer do you think you will be able to hide Satoru?”

Yaga looked up from the doll that he was working on – an ugly green glob with disproportionate limbs that reminded him of those goblins from children's fairy tales – and frowned disapprovingly at Suguru. It looked absolutely ridiculous with the needle still wedged between his thumb and forefinger, a long yellow thread attached to it and leading back to the doll's pointy ear he had been sewing on, and scraps of green cloth and lint sprinkled over his head like snow. His glasses were missing, and he wasn't wearing his school jacket, surprisingly enough.

The whole office smelled of fresh linen and dust.

“Hello to you too, Suguru. Why, I’m doing alright, thank you for asking. I’m glad you finally deemed it worthy of your time to come see little old me.”

Suguru rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. Had Satoru’s theatrics rubbed off on the man over the years? “Just answer the question.”

Yaga leaned back in his chair, buried the needle into his doll, placed it on his lap and regarded Suguru consideringly. He took his time to reply as if mulling over his answer very carefully. “The only reason why no one has barged in here yet is Tengen-sama. Their patience is going to run out soon, though. They’re not happy with any of us.” With a thoughtful twist to his mouth, he added, “Is Satoru hiding?”

“He’s not scared of some brittle old men,” Suguru scoffed, maybe a little too defensive.

Yaga raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment on it. “Shōko told you everything about the current situation. The better question is: how much longer does he plan to stay low?”

Not long for, most likely, and that was a problem. Suguru bet that there were many people out there who would salivate at the chance to face a Satoru without access to his cursed energy. The thought curled around his insides, squeezing them painfully, dread ringing underneath the ache. They hadn’t discussed it yet, though, and Suguru wasn’t even sure if Satoru had allowed himself to fully process everything, but either way – that *wasn’t* the point here.

“Who knows,” Suguru grumbled. “I’m just trying to make sure that we won’t have to worry about any surprises for another day or two.”

“Why...” Yaga trailed off and his frown made way for an expression that was *too* knowing for Suguru’s liking. It was a mixture of exasperation and grudging fondness, the exact same kind that Yaga had always aimed at him when *he* had instigated some childish shenanigan with Satoru rather than the other way around. He loathed how easily he could recognize it.

“Well?” Suguru grunted impatiently when the silence dragged into awkwardness.

Yaga shrugged. “Why do you think I would know? I’m sure Shōko mentioned my execution order.”

“But you’re not dead.” Suguru crossed his arms over his chest and resisted the urge to hunch over his shoulders or fall back against the doorframe. It was rather chilly here even though the window was closed, and his sweater was fairly thick. “And they’re not looking for you *here*. Why wouldn’t they unless you made a deal with them?”

The thief – *Kenjaku*, he reminded himself, sourness slithering over his tongue – hadn’t bothered to keep tabs on the school after sealing Satoru and the students had been out on the streets for him to observe. So, Suguru was guessing blindly here. But what else could be the reason? Yaga was sitting here in plain sight, doing *nothing*, and the higher-ups just *let* him? *Sure*. Those geezers were stubbornly persistent in their decisions, no matter how reprehensible, if nothing else.

They had to have made a deal with Yaga to allow him roam around freely. Or a binding vow of some sort.

Yaga, startlingly enough, *chuckled*. It wasn’t even mocking or bitter, just a surprised, breathy noise that still managed to rattle Suguru’s nerves and had him bristle in annoyance. “They don’t know the school grounds as well as they think they do, have you considered that?”

That made no sense. When he had demanded to talk to Suguru on that first day, it certainly had

sounded like he was still backing the higher-ups. Or had Suguru misread the situation?

Suguru stepped closer to his desk, both eyebrows lifted skeptically. Something stirred between the hollows of his ribcage, ugly and cold and slimy. “So, what. You hid out in here and let *children* do all the work? They did a terrible job, by the way.”

“The children? Is this really about them?” Yaga said cautiously, his gaze flitting over Suguru as if he were dissecting him, as he steeped his hands and leaned forward. “You had children fighting for you too.”

Suguru recoiled. His guts churned sickeningly and between them, from the pit of his stomach, his remaining cursed spirits yapped and hissed, gnawing at his entrails, anxious. “That’s not-” *the same*. The words burnt in his vocal cords but refused to move past them.

Yaga’s face is so carefully put together that it made his hackles rise even further. “I’m sure. But when our options are limited, we all do things that we *don’t want to*, Suguru.”

“I took care of them, at least!” He had never let Mimiko and Nanako handle anything he wasn’t absolutely sure that they could handle. He had devised contingency plans for them to escape when a situation derailed out of control. He had never sent them off if they didn’t want to. If he had been there, they wouldn’t have-

“Is that why you’re so angry with me?” Yaga sighed and the defeated note in his tone only ticked off Suguru more.

“*Angry*,” Suguru snorted. Something acidic simmered in the space between his throat and chest, searing like heartburn. “I don’t think I’m *angry*. I never was.”

Disappointed, yes. Exhausted, yes.

Not angry. Not at Yaga, at least.

He wasn’t some toddler throwing an irrational tantrum. Over a decade on his own path, death, and resurrection – and yet, whenever Suguru thought of the past, of when everything went to shit, his blood still burnt like poison through his veins. *Nothing* had changed.

“Sugur-”

“It’s not about me,” he cut off Yaga, his pulse pounding deafeningly in his ears and drowning out his own voice. “I made my choices. I don’t regret them.” He *couldn’t*. Not after everything. Not after seeing that the world was still the same shitty dumpster. Regretting would mean admitting that he had run after a delusional cause – that he had led Mimiko and Nanako down a- *No*. He took a deep, trembling breath and steadied himself against the chair opposite of Yaga. “I don’t care if any of that mattered to you or not. What have you done for *Satoru* ever since?”

After Suguru. During Suguru. *What?*

Heck, the fact that Yaga had agreed to keep quiet about *Nanami* was still leaving a nasty taste in his mouth. While Suguru understood *why*, the memory of Satoru sitting on those stairs, hunched over, appearing so much smaller than he was, and lost in guilt that was not his to bear was permanently imprinted into Suguru’s mind. Suguru hadn’t known Nanami quite like Satoru had despite respecting his strait-laced junior – and he ached for the unfair ending that had awaited him in an already shitty world – and maybe someone who was more familiar with their relationship should have talked to Satoru.

That was neither here nor there, though. Yaga sucked at emotional stuff, anyway.

“When was the last time he had a break?” he added sharply. *Prison Realm* notwithstanding.

And there it was: the first fracture in Yaga’s composure – the loosening of his features, the guilt glimmering in his gaze. “You know as well as I do that if Satoru isn’t out there, everything falls apart.” And wasn’t that the goddamn problem?! “People *die*.”

“*Non-sorcerers die*,” Suguru hissed. Wasn’t that what everything always came down to? Exploit your own for the benefit of others.

“Not just them,” Yaga disagreed sharply, his arms falling on the desk with a loud thud. “We have also lost many sorcerers in Satoru’s absence.” He paused, squinted at him, unimpressed. “You’re still going on about that?”

Suguru took a step back, grateful that he didn’t stumble, and groaned. “I’m not doing this right now.”

“Always running when you don’t want to be challenged,” Yaga muttered angrily. He pushed his own chair back and stood up, both hands gripping the edge of his desk. “If you’re staying here only because of Satoru-”

“I don’t need any other reason.”

If it weren’t for Saotru, Suguru wouldn’t even be *here*, alive and breathing and in control of his own body. Satoru was *all* he had left and he knew exactly how everything would pan out once Satoru was back to full strength. Suguru was sick of that same play, had been sick of it for a long time now more than he was of the existence of non-sorcerer scum.

What more reason did he need? The world around them was already falling apart, there was no saving, just minimizing the damage, but Suguru still had a haven of his own underneath all the rubble. He would cling on and keep it whole.

Yaga’s mouth twisted into a thin, displeased line. “So, after total non-communication for years, you’re jumping right into codependency?”

Fucking hell. He had just wanted an answer to one simple question! “Were you always so annoying? Why does it matter?”

Much to his surprise, the older man faltered, his shoulders slumping in resignation, and huffed out a ragged breath. “I guess... it doesn’t. Not that anything *I* say has ever stopped you two.” Satisfied, Suguru nodded to himself and turned on his heel but was stopped by a low, begrudging admission of, “For what it’s worth, I *am* glad to have you back.”

Suguru was proud that he caught himself before he could falter. He clicked his tongue, annoyed. “Oh, *really*?”

Behind himself, he heard Yaga fall back into his seat, the chair squeaking in protest. “You’re right. I didn’t- I did a poor job as a teacher. I should’ve done more. For you. Him.”

Suguru hovered in front of the barely closed door, chest twisting into tight knots. He glanced over his shoulder, a sickeningly sweet smile stretching over his lips. “Are you getting *sentimental* on me in your old age? Creepy.”

Yaga looked like he wanted to be anywhere else but here. Good. He bent sideways, picking up his

doll that Suguru hadn't realized had fallen down. "*Regardless* of that attitude of yours, you're welcome here. I suppose."

Yeah, because Suguru had waited for his approval, huh? "*Me?* The mass murdering lunatic? Are you sure?"

And alright, maybe he was overdoing it now, judging from how quickly Yaga's expression just soured. "Well, Satoru has a point: you already died, and you haven't harmed anyone, since then. We're all in the same boat, anyway."

"Execution buddies?" he couldn't help but mock.

"With *Satoru*," Yaga growled, exasperated. Suguru wondered if he would throw his stupid doll at him, his fingers sure were squeezing it a bit too tightly.

"Whatever you say." Suguru left the room chuckling to himself, his steps disgustingly light, although he couldn't fully dispel the irritation simmering in the back of his mind.

He ignored the "Let the students help you with the preparations!" yelled after him and made sure to bang the door hard on his way out. As if.

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Suguru hadn't expected to get ambushed as soon as he left the main building.

Well, he didn't think anyone would necessarily attack him on the school's grounds at all – it wasn't as if he had provoked the brats as of late and there was no one else around.

And yet, here he was, staring at what looked like an impressively wide spearhead buried into the wall just inches from his nose as if it were butter. An acidic odor wafted off its metal, searing through his nose and tightly winding around his guts, jostling them sickeningly.

In the back of his consciousness, an insistent pressure rose like a calloused palm bracing itself against his mind. The low chuckling noises ringing between his ears were more familiar by now but not any less dreadful.

"Your reaction speed is slow."

*Great.* Just his luck, wasn't it?

He exhaled slowly through his nose, trying to keep a lid on the sparks of irritation flaring within him. Maybe his conversation with Yaga had left him more on edge than he had realized... "You didn't even graze me."

"Maybe I wasn't trying to."

Suguru's gaze wandered from the wooden hilt of the weapon and its splintered end to Zen'in Maki standing not that far from him, her shadow stretching long and wide in front of her in the afternoon sun. There was something *off* with her, his instincts insisted.

She had snuck up on him without him noticing.

Although he had seen her in passing the other day, it was still jarring how ragged her appearance



was now - as if hell had swallowed her whole and spit her out after thoroughly chewing through every bone and every inch of skin. But apparently, it had failed to grind that stubborn will of hers.

Suguru very deliberately regarded the burn marks on her face, throat and the arm that was still raised. *I lived*, they practically screamed, an ode etched into her body for the rest of her life. It was winter, the chill was sitting aching in his own muscles and yet, she was walking around sleeveless? She was either a show-off, proud of the survival marks, or a masochist intent on reminding herself of whatever failures they represented.

“Nice make-over,” Suguru drawled.

Her right eye twitched slightly. No glasses, huh? “Thanks. I think it suits me, doesn’t it?” She dropped her arm, placed a hand on her right hip and, with a smirk that was all teeth and jagged edges, added. “Nice *stitches*. Although I’m not sure how *fashionable* forehead tattoos are.” She paused, pursing her lips in exaggeratedly. “But don’t worry, Satoru’s tastes are obviously shitty, so it doesn’t matter.”

Despite himself, Suguru huffed in mild amusement. “Very funny, aren’t you?”

“I try,” she said with the straightest face that Suguru had ever seen on anyone. And he knew *Shōko*.

He reached forward and pulled out the spearhead, careful to avoid the splinters. It wasn’t necessarily heavy, but most people would struggle to carry it, let alone throw it around like a ball. There was cursed energy imbued within, especially condensed in its three tips. The smell churned his already protesting intestines further. With it, the pressure in the back of his mind was also growing, a sluggish throbbing sensation that rippled through his temples.

The stitches itched.

Perhaps engaging in small talk wasn’t a great idea.

Slowly, he turned fully around, moving forward a little, lifted the weapon next to his face, closed one eye and stared at her over the middle tip as if he were observing her through a binocular. “Is there anything in particular you wanted from me?”

Zen’in cocked her head, strands of her short-shorn hair falling into her forehead. “Why, is the presence of this *monkey* bothering you?”

“Is that what this is about?” Suguru scoffed, unimpressed. “Past grudges?”

Her aura shifted, turning sharper, colder.

Gravel crunched under her boots as she approached him, every step strong and steady, and he lowered the spearhead cautiously. “I was just curious. Itadori had nice things to say about you.” A sneer curled around her mouth as if the mere notion of anyone having a good opinion of Suguru disgusted her. “Megumi not so much.”

What a surprise. He rolled his eyes. “I’m devastated, truly.”

“Maybe you should be! Satoru basically raised Megumi, you know. And his *monkey* sister.”

Her tone was starting to grate against his restless nerves.

Of course, Suguru had known. He had found out shortly after Satoru had taken the Fushiguro siblings under his wing. How could he have missed that? *Gojō* Satoru taking responsibility for a

Zen'in brat? The gossip mill had buzzed incessantly, and the news had kept Suguru awake more nights than he was willing to admit.

Zen'in Tōji's kid *and* a non-sorcerer.

It had seemed like a taunt aimed directly at him, back then. In hindsight, Suguru was well aware of how stupid and rather selfish that had been, but his past self hadn't been as clear minded about this. Perhaps, if the bitterness crawling over his tongue and nestling between his taste buds was any indication, he *still* wasn't.

Suguru needed to get a grip on *that*. He had been the one to walk out on Satoru, he truly had no right to feel upset over any decisions that Satoru had taken afterward.

Zen'in held out a hand demandingly, startling him out of his musings, and for a split second, Suguru considered breaking the weapon into smithereens and raining its remains like confetti over her.

It was a negligible moment of inattention.

He caught the movement out of the corner of his eyes, just barely in the radius of his vision – the twitch Zen'in's right leg followed by the subtle bending of her upper body. Suguru's own muscles reacted on instinct: his leg darting out before hers could, kicking out her feet before he could even fully register his actions.

There had to be some impact, maybe a cracking noise or a dull thud, because her face contorted into a grimace of pain, but his ears were ringing too deafeningly to pick up on anything. Suguru blinked away the fuzziness that tried to crawl into the edges of his awareness and took a step back, trembling ever so slightly. Nerves were skidding underneath his skin, frazzled and burning, and his pulse was reverberating through his whole body as if it were a violin whose strands were being plucked without finesse or prowess.

*Shit.*

Suguru inhaled a lungful of freezing air, hoping it would cool him down, turned the spearhead in his grip and threw it down like a dart. It dug into the pavement next to her head, going as deep as the hilt and while the few cracks around it weren't worth notice, he could feel waves of cursed energy rippled underneath his feet.

"Too slow," he grunted, faint satisfaction coursing through his veins when her pain was replaced by utter contempt. "*And* predictable. One would think that you would've improved since last year."

She *had* – the way she held herself, how she had snuck up on him undetected, how subtle her motions had been, the air around her, it was all proof of progress – but Suguru would swallow a barrage of *Special Grade* curses before even considering admitting to that.

"But I get it, nothing can come from *nothing*, least of all improvement."

Zen'in went ramrod stiff, her gaze clouding over with an emotion that Suguru refused to ponder over. "Yet, I'm unharmed. Last year, too. You could've *killed* me," she hissed as if she had bitten out a chunk of one of his curses, words trembling and unsteady. "But you didn't. How come?"

"Maybe I was waiting for you to die painfully." He *had* left her mangled, after all, and hadn't expected Okkotsu to be able to use *Reversed Curse Technique* to heal.

"Somehow, I doubt that." Her expression sharpened with an intensity that put Suguru on edge, hackles raised. "Were you worried that if you went *too far*, Satoru wouldn't forgive you?" Suguru

didn't react, he was sure, but something had to have given because she laughed, loud and without any humor, sounding absolutely maniac. "How cute."

Suguru highly doubted that Satoru would have been forgiving if he had managed to kill only Okkotsu. Though, he *hadn't* been out to murder Satoru's students back then, even if the temptation with *this* one had been suffocating, and Okkotsu himself had been supposed to be nothing but an unfortunate sacrifice for a greater good.

If the image of Satoru, during Suguru's dramatic declaration of war, standing between Suguru and his kids had overridden his murder temptation, no one needed to know.

The irritating chuckling in his ears bloomed to full on laughter, distorted words scattered within it. He was sure that *disgusting* was one of them. Suguru paid it no attention even if his throat was clogging up with anxious nerves.

*Focus. Satoru. Zen'in.*

"You bring Satoru into this an awful lot." He squinted down at her, thoughtful. "Are you mad at me or *him*?"

Pain notwithstanding, Zen'in had an impressive control over her facial muscles, yet little things - such as the twitching of the right corner of her mouth and the subtle dip of her eyebrows - were as easy to read as a whole book on her current emotional state would be. Suguru was surprised that she hadn't jumped to her feet to strangle him yet.

"What does it matter to you?"

Nothing, really. "You did attack me, unprovoked."

"Your existence is provocation enough," she snarled - in an oddly composed fury rather than wildly lashing out and yet, the manic edge hadn't left neither her tone nor her expression.

It made Suguru pause.

There was something... not quite right with this girl. She had seemed off ever since confronting him, now more obviously. Referring to herself as a monkey in an underhanded attempt to insult him, trying to catch him off-guard and possibly inciting a useless fight, reacting to him downplaying her abilities and improvements... Her dark eyes - there was a frustration slithering within them, anger and a sliver of helplessness tinted with resignation, a thread pulled so taut that it could snap at any moment, and-

It wasn't unfamiliar.

*'Seeing yourself in a monkey?'*

Suguru's fingers dug into the hilt until he could hear faint cracks.

Bile simmered in the crevice of his throat, aching, damning.

Zen'in sat up, folded one leg in front of her and propped up the other to throw an arm over her knee. Anger was still radiating off her in waves, carved into her features, drawn into the tense line of her shoulders. "Satoru may trust you, but Satoru's also an idiot."

Well, he couldn't argue with that. What did that make *him*, though? Staying here with people who couldn't stand his guts because he refused to leave Satoru.

Fluidly, she heaved herself up, taking the weapon along in the same motion, and glared at him. “He let you stay but you better watch out.”

*Huh.* It clicked. “He let me stay despite last year. Is that it?”

He could *hear* her teeth grinding, could see the veins bulging on her arms, could almost smell the viciousness in the air.

Without a shred of hesitation, she walked into his personal space and although she had to look up, it didn’t feel like she was. “Megumi also mentioned your slip in control,” she said, ignoring his remark completely. “I *hope* it was just that. You’re dead, otherwise.”

*I wouldn’t mind,* he thought bitterly. Rather dead than causing Satoru any more pains. Out aloud, he only grinned. “Aren’t you kids adorable, protective ducklings?”

“You two really are the same breed of annoying,” Zen’in scoffed, disgusted, as she turned on her heel.

Suguru should let her leave and slink back to Satoru, maybe grab some painkillers from Shōko on the way or ask Satoru to massage his scalp. There was no need to prolong his own plight. Yet.

“For someone so concerned over Satoru, you’ve been avoiding him a lot. He’s in his room. I’ll even give you a head start!” he shouted after her just to be obnoxious.

He wasn’t sure if she was going to listen to him, but frankly speaking - Satoru ought to clear the air with her because Suguru wasn’t eager to have to watch out for secret assassination plots. If she refused to see him, he would just spill everything that he had observed.

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Suguru hadn’t meant to listen in. *Really.*

He had intended to step aside as soon as he realized that Satoru was still with someone. Despite him having dragged his feet and taken his time to trudge back. But...

“...patronizing me,” Zen’in was hissing like some enraged cat.

Satoru clicked his tongue disapprovingly, the noise barely audible through the crack of the ajar door. “I’m not? You *did* well.”

“*Well,* right. I did well, staying at the bottom, huh?”

Suguru took a step back, and another, throat constricting painfully. Feeling like you were stuck, unable to move forward like the rest, like the more talented ones... It wasn’t even comparable; she had been born with barely any jujutsu unlike him and neither did she have the pinnacle of their world as a measuring stick right in front of her. And yet.

He was clearly losing his mind.

“Living is doing pretty well if you ask me. Can’t say the same for that old drunkard, good riddance.”

“Satoru-”

“No,” Satoru interrupted and Suguru could count on one hand how many times he had heard Satoru sound this *stern*. As if he were scolding a child. “Surviving is an *achievement*.”

There was an awkward pause that had Suguru physically cringe. And then,

“God, why’re you getting all emotional on me?!”

“You started it!”

“I most certainly did not!”

“If you’d just listen-”

“I’ve listened to enough!”

“You stubborn little- You know me! Would I back you if I didn’t think you had potential?!”

Suguru moved away until he couldn’t hear them anymore, slid down the wall and leaned back, legs crossed in front of him. His head was still pounding, and his stomach was in knots, gut churning sickeningly.

He hoped that the brat would be done fast.

---

The thick fog blanketing his mind slowly started to dissolve as moist warmth trickled over it.

It trailed over his throbbing stitches, lingering on his temple long enough to leave tingling imprints on his skin before wandering down his cheek. His face was turned gently, and the same moist warmth started to cover the other side.

Suguru blinked blearily, shrugging off the ropes of slumber that were loosely wrapped around his consciousness. As the fuzziness lifted off him, his vision filled out with a shock of white. Entranced, he buried his fingers into it, momentarily stunned when his hand didn’t freeze over and marveling at the softness. Satoru twitched under his fingers, his stuttering breath a smoldering charcoal settled into the pit of Suguru’s stomach. He tugged Satoru up and pressed their mouths together, half delirious.

It was a sluggish kiss, a little clumsy with his lips slipping off a little when he moved them, but the heat gradually crawling into his cold limbs and spreading through his blood had him hum appreciatively.

“What’re ya doin’?” he murmured hoarsely, finally *looking*.

When Satoru’s eyes fixated on his, they were glimmering like a thousand stars on the vastness of a cloudless winter sky. Suguru’s heart skipped a beat only to jump more violently against his chest, rattling his ribcage.

“Waking you up!” Satoru grinned. He leaned back minimally, there was barely a hairbreadth between them, he could *taste* Satoru’s breaths, sugary sweet, and yet Suguru found himself, embarrassingly enough, swallowing a needy whine. Satoru’s grin crinkled around the edges as if he knew. “What are *you* doing sleeping out here? It’s cold *and* uncomfortable.”

He didn't feel like he had slept, more like a too short nap. His head was so heavy... "You seemed busy."

Satoru huffed, amused, a faint foggy cloud escaping him. It was only then that Suguru noticed that he was crouched next to him, balancing on the tips of his feet, no shoes just woolen socks, and definitely dressed too lightly for these temperatures. He could see the goosebumps decorating his arms where the shirt had ridden up!

*Idiot.* Suguru let his hand drift from Satoru's hair down his nape and toward his left shoulder and tipped him over without warning. He wound his other arm securely around Satoru's waist, not giving him any room to move when he jerked in surprise.

"What ar- don't you want to go inside?"

"Hmm. In a bit." Affectionately, he pressed his nose against the side of Satoru's throat and smiled slightly when that earned him a disgruntled hiss of, "Cold, you jerk!" Yet, he doesn't push him away.

Satoru's twisted a little until his knees were resting against the wall next to Suguru's head, his feet planted on Suguru's thigh, and it didn't take him long to sag fully into the embrace, his face pushed into Suguru's hair. His skin smelled of mint and roses with traces of the alluring warmth underneath a blanket cocoon on chilly morning. It was a soothing scent and eased some of the pressure scraping against his mind.

It was also lulling, though.

So comfortable...

"Did you fight with Maki?" Satoru whispered, tone hushed.

Of course, it couldn't last. "Is that what she said?"

Satoru's chin carded through Suguru's hair and it took him a second to realize that he was shaking his head. "She said that my *'shitty taste'* told her to find me." Suguru wasn't sure if it was the laughter ringing in Satoru's voice or his words, but his own smile stretched wider. "So. You two just - *talked?*"

"More or less."

Gentle fingers skidded over his neck, brushing over the small hairs there, and an equally gentle palm cradled his face more firmly into the crook of Satoru's shoulder. "Thanks."

A thousand tiny wings flap underneath his heart, accelerating its steady rhythm into an excited buzz. "What for?"

Satoru snorted, a moist puff fanning over Suguru's temple. "I don't know. Talking to her? Civilly?" More hesitantly, he added, "I know you're still not- well. *Okay.* With..."

Instinctive, Suguru stiffened. *Still.* As if Suguru would come around eventually.

*'You're half-way there, anyway.'*

Suguru flinched, ears ringing painfully, his grip tightening.

*'Love conquers all, huh? Even your own individuality.'*

Ugh, that bastard... The voice was like ice cubes being grinded together and crumbling over his eardrums.

Satoru nudged his jaw back and scrutinized his with a worried crease digging between his eyebrows. "You alright?"

*'The Strongest Jujutsu Sorcerer fawning over you like some cheap shōjo heroine. And you wasted that power? Pathetic.'*

"Nothing," he grunted unconvincingly.

*You've read shōjo? Really?*

"You do know that I'm not stupid, right?" Satoru grumbled sourly.

"I mean it. I'm just a little tired. Probably the weather."

"That's what you said back then too," Satoru said, tone sharp, a strong note of bitterness slithering underneath. *"Just a little tired from the summer heat."*

Suguru's blood froze over. "You... remember that?" Even the exact wording. He recollected Satoru asking about his wellbeing in the period after the Star Plasma Vessel disaster and his defection, but the details escaped him.

*'If I were you-'*

Harshly, Suguru pushed back against the pressure squishing his mind, with Satoru's scent and warmth engulfing him, with him allowing Satoru's familiar presence to wash over him, it was so easy, just a little nudge and the voice fizzled out, the ice melted, and calm settled over his him.

He didn't notice that his muscles had stiffened.

Firmly, Satoru framed his face and held it steady, the sharpness in his features making way for silent imploration. "I don't want you to hide anything. I'm really sick of being kept in the dark." And ah, that was definitely guilt tugging at his insides. "Spite it out. What is it? The stitches? Do you want Shōko to have a look? Don't make me beg, Suguru."

Despite the seriousness of it all, Suguru couldn't help but crack a teasing smile. "And *why* would I be opposed to that?"

"Don't be an ass," Satoru huffed, flustered, and pulled his bangs, reprimanding.

*Killjoy.* "It's really nothing," he sighed in resignation, shrugged. "Just - *that* guy. He's like an annoying radio in the background," he rushed to explain when he saw Satoru open his mouth. "It's not bad, most of the time. But sometimes..." He paused, chewed thoughtfully on the inside of his cheek, hesitating, but one look into Satoru's brimming eyes and his resolution crumbled. "I'm worried that I'm losing control."

Silence followed his rueful admission.

Anxiety crawled underneath his skin like ants.

Then, abruptly, Satoru's blunt nails dug into his face and he surged down, kissing him as if he were trying to devour him whole. Heat coiled in the pit of his stomach, alighting the smoldering coal, the fire spreading into his veins, scorching. His vision blurred and his pulse sped up so much that it

made him dizzy.

“You won’t,” Satoru gasped.

Suguru’s addled mind didn’t immediately register that he had said anything at all. He blinked, his heart lodging in his throat, his brain foggy. “H-how can you-hngh.”

Satoru burnt another kiss to his lips and another, repeatedly, all tongue and teeth and determination, licking off every single trace of protest. “Shut up. You *won’t*,” he hissed, *ordered* and it left no room for argument.

“You’re ridiculous,” Suguru huffed, choked.

Satoru scrunched up his nose. “I’m serious.”

Suguru laughed against his mouth, feeling light, as if he were floating. “I know, I know. If his highness ordained it, I really can’t, huh?”

“Maki’s right, I do have shitty taste.”

When he tried to retreat, Suguru grabbed his hair, maybe a little too harshly, and pulled him back in, leaving no space between them. “I’ll even let Shōko do a check-up, alright?”

He hadn’t realized how tense Satoru was until he slumped against him.

Suguru smiled, kissed his chin, scraping his teeth playfully against his lower lip, delighted when he could feel Satoru shudder. “Now, I’ve also got a question.”

“What?” Satoru asked distractedly. He had tilted his head sideways, allowing Suguru to latch onto his jaw and the patch of skin where his throat started. Satoru’s pulse vibrated enthrallingly against his tongue.

Sheepishly, Suguru admitted, “Well, less of a question and more of a demand.”

Satoru’s gaze bore into him impatiently. “What?!”

*Testy.* Suguru leaned back slightly, fingers dancing all over Satoru’s features, mapping out every inch they could reach. “Let’s go to the beach,” he said, quietly but firmly. “Okinawa.”

Satoru’s eyes widened, his already wide-blown pupils extending further. He caught himself fast, though. “*Now?*”

If Suguru could have teleported, he wouldn’t even have asked. The sooner Satoru and he could get their minds off the ghosts haunting this school, the better. “In a day or two.”

“Is that... Aren’t there more pressing matters to take care of than a vacation?”

*How responsible.* Faux-exaggerated, Suguru pinched Satoru’s nose. “We can get rid of the higher-ups at any time. That’s not pressing.” Of course, that wasn’t everything that needed to be done. But Satoru wouldn’t be out there fighting curses any time soon and definitely not on Suguru’s watch.

To his surprise, a blinding smile stretched over Satoru’s kiss-swollen lips and it was the most beautiful thing Suguru had seen today. “*We?*”

His own chest swelled, fuzzy affection bubbling within. “I’m not leaving you out of my sight,” he teased.



He watched Satoru's complaints corrode. In their wake, begrudging acceptance and veiled content spread. "Alright. Fine. *But*," he added, his stern tone betrayed by the twitching of mouth, "the kids are coming too."

"Way to ruin the mood," Suguru grumbled.

"Oh, shut up," Satoru laughed right into his ear, the sound soothing.

Whatever. If that made him happy... Suguru really didn't have it in him to refuse.

## Chapter End Notes

- First of all, the chapter count is a tentative estimate on my part. I never planned to stretch this story *too* long and I'd love to wrap it up soon, but I also know myself. Let's see if I can stick to this or whether I'll start adding more content <.<

- A little 'ode' to Yaga? :p Gege really did that to the poor man... I wouldn't say that Geto hates Yaga or anything, he's just bitter and not even on his own behalf because he made his own choices a long time ago. It just hit me with all the recent chapters in the manga that Gojo really was holding everything together and he probably didn't have a single break ever since the SPV mission. I always interpreted it as such that Gojo being over-burdened with responsibilities was probably also a thing that added to Geto's spiralling. He wanted a world safe for sorcerers, after all - a world in which Gojo wouldn't have to take on so much work. And Yaga being their former teacher, I guess Geto's just disappointed that he didn't do *enough*.

- Maki and Geto, ah. Ngl, while I had the Maki part planned out weeks ago, the latest chapter really added to my inspiration :p This story is very much canon-divergent by now, so the whole Zen'in-estate-ordeal may or may not have happened. Either way, I love to dig a little into Maki's mental state because there's no way that she doesn't have insecurities that she tries to bury - and we did see that she doesn't feel good enough (yet). Geto seeing a lil of himself (when he was stuck in place while Gojo kept getting stronger and farther away from him) was unexpected but! And hey, he wasn't *\*that\** bad to her! :p

- I love writing Geto like this, a bit of a bastard, sassy, dramatic and yet, soft when it comes to a certain someone.

- Lmao, I honestly looked away every other sentence while editing that stsg scene??? It's not even all that much, nowhere near explicit, they're just... so disgustingly in love and mushy. God. It might have been one of my favorite stsg moments to write, though. I don't know, they just deserve to be soft and happy, lol.

- I'm sure some of you caught what Geto's planning. If not - *\*hint\** What month is this taking place in?

- Aaaand, that's all! Just a heads-up in case that the next update may take as long as

this one or longer - this is currently a busy time for me and it will be busy for a couple of months (and I'm totally neglecting the things I should be doing because I am a #1 procrastinator) :/ Not fun, but it is what it is! Thank you for all your support so far and I hope you enjoyed this chapter :)

## Chapter 7

### Chapter Notes

Omg, it has been so long, guys ٭(≥⋈≤)〃 I really didn't expect that this chapter might take so much time... I got a little distracted and busy when a writer's block hit :/ I'm also sorry, there are comments I haven't replied to yet (I'll try to do that now and/or tomorrow, if needed - it's late here, lmao).

Thank you so much for 2k kudos!! And all your lovely comments and support <3 I hope you will enjoy this chapter - it was a difficult one, but it is here now and I'm just. Going to stop tinkering with it any more D:

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The morning of their departure, they pestered Shōko to examine Suguru thoroughly. Not that she needed any convincing. And this time, no accidents occurred – Kenjaku didn't stir. Though, Suguru was a little green around the nose afterward and his forehead smeared crimson.

“It's a matter of will power,” Shōko was saying as she removed her rubber gloves. Satoru pointedly *didn't* stare at the blood splattered over the tips. “At least, that's my guess. There's *nothing* wrong with his brain.”

“Aside from the fact that it's not mine,” Suguru croaked lowly. Cautiously, Satoru nudged the empty bucket Shōko had handed him before starting the check-up closer to Suguru's restless feet, just in case. While Suguru made no move to take it, he did hunch over it, hands braced on his thighs.

Shōko huffed, amused. The only indication of her frustration was the sharp edge over one corner of her mouth. She hated nothing more than not understanding something related to her field of work and she had been trying to research the relation of the brain to cursed energy for years now. And yet, such little success, thus far.

“Somehow, yes. I'd love to conduct some tests to figure out how overwriting someone's brain is even possible. Or housing two souls in one body.”

Dread flickered over Suguru's tired face, so prominent that Satoru was certain Suguru would rather throw himself out of the next window than play lab rat for their favorite doctor. He could sympathize.

“So, there's nothing to worry about?” Satoru asked, diverting her attention toward himself. He rolled his chair around so that he had a better view of both of them and batted his eyelashes exaggeratedly at her.

Unperturbed, Shōko dug around in the pockets of her scrubs and fished out something flat and rectangular, unwrapped it leisurely and took the gum between her teeth, pushing it back and forth

thoughtfully before shrugging. “As long as Getō can keep control.”

“That’s good, then,” Satoru exhaled. He leaned back in his seat, the wheels creaking under his weight, and stretched out his legs, forcing himself to ignore the sensation of Suguru’s gaze burning on the side of his face.

Shōko raised a questioning eyebrow, staring between them as if she were trying to decode a secret message. Eventually, she settled her focus on him. “You’re doing better, too.”

Caught off-guard, Satoru startled.

Was he really? Following her instructions, he had been keeping tabs on the intervals between the inflow of his cursed energy and its abrupt cutting off; they were becoming shorter, apparently, although Satoru wasn’t sure why such minimal progression would be deemed as ‘getting better’. The nausea, when it hit, was still just as bad as the first time, the occasional fever as well. And the emptiness gnawing at him where his cursed energy was supposed to be just as harrowing, just as maddening.

But he was becoming impatient, he was aware, and Shōko sure knew what she was talking about.

“So, what are you planning to do now?” Shōko asked when the silence between them stretched.

And, *ah*.

Satoru lifted his right shoulder and lowered his head, his muscles stiffening uncomfortably. He hadn’t thought about his next plan of action yet. Too much had happened and as much as he was loath to admit it, currently he wasn’t any help to anyone. Of course, *something* had to happen – an overhaul, the higher-ups couldn’t continue as it was, the Zen’in family’s inheritance mess might be useful, the imbalance caused by Kenjaku hadn’t been taken care of, but... The details...

He swallowed around the sticky lump growing in his throat and scowled down at his feet, sparks of agitation flickering in his veins.

“What’s the rush?” Satoru almost flinched when Suguru’s warm fingers wrapped around his wrist. When had he gotten up? “The problems aren’t going anywhere, unfortunately. And why does *he* have to figure it all out?”

Suguru’s fingers were trembling against his skin, mirroring the anger lacing his words and tugging at Satoru’s chest. Without thinking much on it, he covered them with his own and squeezed, relieved when he felt Suguru exhale slowly. Intoxicating warmth was sizzling through his veins, though.

Shōko raised her palms pacifyingly, her lips crooked up in amusement. “Alright, alright. I was just *asking*.” Less amused, she nodded toward the door behind Satoru expectantly. “Fine, get out. Have fun or whatever.”

Satoru snorted at the skepticism in her voice but grinned regardless as he heaved himself to his feet. He had asked her and Yaga if they wanted to tag along and neither of them had been willing, claiming that it wasn’t a great idea to fully abandon the school. Why sound so grumpy now?

Suguru, too, smiled, albeit wryly he had his own reservations about their little trip, though he hadn’t voiced them yet.

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Satoru couldn't fathom why his students bothered to hide their discomforts.

Earlier this morning, when the second years had arrived at the vacant cottage on an equally abandoned beach, jumping from the clawed grip of Suguru's six-legged not-quite-bird cursed spirit in various states of disorientation, Satoru could have sworn that blood had been splattered over Toge's lips and smeared at the corners of his mouth. As if the boy had stretched the limits of his technique – mid-air? He hadn't gotten the chance to ask before Toge had zipped up his collar as fast as possible and hastily disappeared inside.

Now, Toge's knuckles were turning minutely whiter as his fingers dug more and more tightly into the arm of his sweater that hung limply at his side – *empty* – right where his shoulder ended. Satoru had been staring hard until Toge caught his gaze and immediately tried to school the pained creases on his forehead and ease his grip. He would have huffed in amusement if the worry didn't sit like a heavy, wet log between his guts, squishing and poking them uncomfortably.

These kids were *terrible* actors. Why even bother?

Satoru let the squeaking door fall shut behind him, cutting off the jumble of chatter within. "Isn't it fully healed yet?"

Toge tilted his head from one side to the other as if mentally weighing the pros and cons of answering. He nodded eventually, shrugged, and pointed at the darkened sky above them. The sudden motion had Yūta, who had been curled around one of the chicken legs of their transportation curse, startle out of his doze. At least, Satoru assumed that Yūta had been dozing off. Why was he snuggling with Suguru's pet? Did Suguru *know*?

He shook his head and squinted at the dark clouds scattered through the sky. Ever since they had left the safety of the school, a permanent chill had settled underneath his skin – it was *cold* and the abandoned cottage that they had snuck into had no heaters – and under the onslaught of restless gusts of winds, it grew frostier now, trickling into his blood and wedging between his joints. He could taste the dampness saturating the air in the back of his throat.

"The cold?" he chanced a guess when the silence between them stretched too long and the howling of the wind that filled it chafed aggravatingly against his nerves.

Toge dipped his chin in a stiff, affirmative nod.

Satoru was no doctor, but he was familiar with wounds like these – just scars, nothing as terrible as a lost limb, nothing nearly as absolute – stirring up under certain conditions. His own scars had healed a long time ago, but he still remembered how, when the temperatures sank and rains became frequent for months after, they would flare up under the patches of firm skin that had been knit back together over them.

Without thinking it through, he stepped forward, planks crunching under his weight, and reached for Toge's shoulders. Toge tensed up but didn't jerk away and even leaned into the touch after several heartbeats. *Satoru*, though, almost flinched when feeling that stump, his guts lurching violently.

His cursed energy was a fickle thing, thrumming through his veins lazily, the space too cramped for blood and it, leaving Satoru faintly nauseous and his body too tightly strung. It was there, though. And didn't shy away when he coaxed it into the tips on his left fingers, mouth pressed into a tight line and eyebrows furrowed.

He couldn't heal others, ridiculously enough. But perhaps, if his palms heat up enough, that might offer some comfort.

Why the boys were loitering around here instead of resting or joining the bustle inside, audible even now, he couldn't understand. Satoru had craved fresh air, feeling a little anxious in the rather small and cramped rooms, and found them, instead, doing gods knew what with Suguru's bird-creature. Seriously, how come Suguru had left it to their devices? Satoru was fairly certain that Suguru and Yūta weren't on good terms yet, so he couldn't imagine either of them approaching the other for anything. Toge, then?

Curiosity got the better of him. "What are you boys doing, anyway?"

They exchanged a *look*. Satoru observed their silent communication with amusement.

"A little training," Yūta said.

Satoru glanced at him thoughtfully, noticing how the bird was rubbing its beak against the back of Yūta's shoulder without Yūta as much as twitching. *Training*? On a little vacation? How impatient.

It clearly hadn't been for Yūta since his katana was nowhere in sight; he still looked a little sleepy. But what exactly was Toge trying to do? This particular curse wasn't a Special Grade, but it *was* above a usual Grade One. Using cursed speech on it would certainly be a strain, though nothing that Toge couldn't handle. Was it about improving his endurance? That was Toge's main weak spot.

"We're going to work up the levels," Yūta explained when Satoru didn't say anything. "Stronger curses, stronger commands." More hesitantly and with a doubtful look thrown at Toge, he added, "Maybe you could spar with him at the end of it, once you're better?"

Satoru startled, caught off-guard. "*Me*?"

Not that it was an issue. Most of his students hated to spar with him – for whatever reason. He was a *great* sparring partner! – and the second years specifically didn't approach him for personal training sessions much anymore, except for Yūta. But – the phrasing. The tone, too hesitant accompanied with a careful glance toward Toge as if Yūta worried about misspeaking, struck him as odd.

Working his way up through several power levels of cursed spirits would certainly be beneficial for Toge, but if Toge wanted to be able to take on Special Grades, he could use Yūta as well. Why *Satoru*-?

No, wait.

Abruptly, his attention swiveled around, snapping toward Toge so suddenly that he could *feel* the muscles under his palm jump in surprise. "How close w-" He cut himself off, grimaced and tried again, "Is this about Sukuna?"

Toge's eyes hardened. There was no fear nor resentment in there, just steely determination and underneath it, faintly, the flicker of a wound physically invisible.

As far as Satoru was aware, Toge hadn't been near Sukuna when that wretched demon had levelled a good chunk of Shibuya. There had been no way for him to stop that attack and frankly, Satoru was glad that he hadn't been near to the source of that chaos, even though he had still been caught in the attack. And even if he had been in Sukuna's range, using his Cursed Speech on the guy would have killed Toge.

That was the point, though, wasn't it? *Not* to get killed while applying stronger commands to stronger opponents. Dangerous because of Cursed Speech's instant repercussions when the limits were breached and yet, the only effective way to improve.

"I wouldn't mind helping," Satoru relented slowly.

Of course, he wouldn't, although he couldn't fully dissipate the hesitation stirring in his blood. Would training alone suffice to help if the goal was *Sukuna*? There was only so much that potential and hard work could achieve, after all. But then again, Satoru was no one to speak on matters like these. At worst, it would come off as him being patronizing – a lesson he had learned the hard way in the past – and at best, as him not trusting his student. A careful sweep of Toge's features, the determination set into the edges, eased his doubts. Hard work, potential and an iron will – *could* stretch the ceiling limitlessly.

He removed his hand from Toge's shoulder and placed it on his head, ruffling his tousled hair gently. "But just to make it clear: you couldn't have stopped Sukuna. That's *not* your fault."

There wasn't much else he could say. Feeling regretful – and who wouldn't? Anyone would be crushed after putting in so much effort into saving lives only for those lives to be snuffed out within the blink of an eye shortly after – was only natural. Regret was something that Satoru could neither take away from the kids nor shield them from. Trying... would feel like cheapening their experiences. That was alright, though. Regrets weren't a death sentence, after all – as long as one learned not to let them consume them whole.

But Satoru *needed* every one of them to understand that Shibuya and everything afterward hadn't been their fault.

*Satoru* had messed up, Kenjaku had pulled the strings and jujutsu society had been inadequate - or unwilling, though that wasn't something he wanted to mull over right now - in dealing with the outfall.

"And I mean that," he emphasized when Toge scrunched up his nose in disagreement. "Sukuna was an unexpected variable. You did well, everything considered." *Surviving* that attack was impressive in itself.

Toge's expression softened. He pulled his already high collar up even higher and averted his gaze, making a quiet sound that was neither affirmation, nor denial, but it lightened the weight on Satoru's chest all the same.

Yūta was smiling when Satoru turned back toward him, his dark eyes sparkling. Satoru *almost* felt bad for souring his mood, "You asked *Suguru* for help?"

"*Me*?" Yūta scoffed, though it was a lot less sharp than Satoru would have expected. "No! Inumaki-san did."

"Salmon," Toge agreed quietly.

The mere thought of *that* conversation had Satoru chuckle in amusement. He would have to ask Suguru about it later.

"No need to sound so scandalized." Satoru let go of Toge after checking his expression for any sign of pain, and walked down the two steps, paused at the bottom to enjoy the sensation of his feet sinking ever so slightly in the sand before he trudged over. The bird immediately raised its head, Yūta forgotten, and craned its long neck forward, a garbled sound escaping it. Chuckling

lowly, Satoru reached out and patted its beak. “You’re very chummy with his pet here is all.”

“Maybe that *thing* is chummy with *me*,” Yūta grumbled petulantly.

Satoru laughed, beyond amused. His hand slid off the beak and settled on top of Yūta’s head, ruffling his hair. Sometimes, he forgot that underneath all that maturity, Yūta was still a kid – one with a tendency for cheekiness and dramatics. “I heard that you did really well in my absence.”

Yūta ducked his head, hiding his face, and shrugged. “It was nothing.”

“Dealing with the old crooks is not *nothing*,” Satoru huffed. Behind him, Toge snorted in agreement. Ah, they both had to deal with the higher-ups, hadn’t they? He pushed the flare of irritation into the back of his mind to simmer in later and sighed, half exasperated, half fond. “You did good looking after everyone.”

“...thanks.”

Huh, was that embarrassment?

Grinning wickedly, Satoru tugged a little harder on his hair. “And you know, there’s no shame in liking Suguru’s curses! I’m sure he’ll let you babysit more often!”

“*Sensei!*”

---

That night, the cottage was eerily quiet.

Considering that it was almost midnight, the silence *shouldn’t* be a surprise. But Satoru was fairly certain that there had been careful movements and muffled voices flitting through the little building shortly before Suguru had fetched him. Right now, it seemed as if no one had been here in a while. And yet, he could see faint traces of various cursed energies, sprinkled on the insides on his eyelids like dying paint spray painstakingly squeezed out of its bottle.

The silence prickled uncomfortably against Satoru’s senses, putting him on edge.

*Suguru’s too calm*, he chided himself. *If something were wrong, he wouldn’t be.*

“It’s going to rain.”

The sharp displeasure dripping from Suguru’s words had Satoru snap out of his musings, his discomfort momentarily forgotten. Suguru was blocking the doorway, still refusing to let Satoru peek outside, his shoulders stiff with tension. A cool breeze wafted past him, bringing with it the taste of salt and rain and storm. It tousled Satoru’s hair, sending shivers rippling down his spine, and filled him with giddy excitement.

He had always enjoyed watching storms descend and out here, at the open beach with the vast ocean already restless with anticipation, the scenery was bound to be *something*. Here, it reeked of a freedom that neither the drab backdrop of the school could have offered, nor the figments of a dark confinement and its skeletal shackles wanted to allow him.

Satoru thought back to the obvious dark clouds that had been scattered over the sky throughout the day and couldn’t help but snort, amused. “How shocking.”



Suguru craned his neck back and scowled at him half-heartedly. “Your sarcasm is very mistimed, dear.”

*Damn*, he was actually cute like that – trying to glare a hole through him but lacking the heat, lips pursed in disgruntlement like a child denied its treat, long strands of hair whipping wildly into his face. Satoru tiptoed closer, hands crossed behind his back, and smiled impishly. “Really, Suguru. *Beach in December?*”

“You agreed!”

*Because I wasn’t thinking.* And once he had realized what month they were in, long after Suguru’s request, it simply hadn’t seemed worth mentioning anymore. “I can’t be held accountable for the decisions I made while I wasn’t sound of mind!”

Suguru’s mouth curved up smugly, disgruntlement falling off him like carelessly discarded clothes. He turned around a little and propped his left elbow against the doorframe as he leaned on it. “Yeah? What managed to make *you* lose your mind? Maybe I could learn.”

Satoru recollected the heat simmering in his veins and the scorching trails of feverish kisses on clammy skin and huffed in exasperated fondness. *Insufferable.* “Shut up and let me see what nonsense you’ve hatched out for my birthday.”

“Eh, you remember?” Suguru said it questioningly, but his eyes were twinkling knowingly.

“*Obviously.*”

He wasn’t that big an idiot and he had had days to re-familiarize himself with the concept of steady time flow. Celebrating his birthday was wholly unneeded and probably inappropriate considering what had happened and was happening around them, currently, but – even the kids had been on board with this little trip. And Suguru seemed genuinely pleased. There hadn’t even been a single incident despite all of them being cramped in this cottage. So, who was Satoru to discourage them? They deserved some time to enjoy themselves far away from the troubles of jujutsu society.

And Satoru himself was glad to have an excuse to block out everything for the day. Curses, Suguru’s parasitic brain, the higher-ups, the *dead* – later. He would worry about them *after* this. There was no rush today, just as Suguru had said.

Besides, he had always had a soft spot for the beach. Nostalgia, perhaps.

“I have hatched nothing,” Suguru grumbled as he stepped out and motioned for Satoru to do the same. “I just wanted a peaceful night under the open sky.”

“How romantic,” Satoru teased both in response to Suguru’s words and to the sight that greeted him as soon as he stepped over the threshold: a path framed by thick candles on each side along the dock. Their flames were struggling in the wind, flickering weakly, and he was surprised that they hadn’t been snuffed out yet. The ones farthest away resembled little, excited fireflies. How goddamn cheesy. How stupidly charming. “Twenty-nine?”

“Unless you’ve aged more when I wasn’t looking.”

“If you look hard enough,” Satoru snorted as he tugged at his hair, “you might even find some white strands!”

Suguru was still standing close to the door, crookedly leaning against the frame, arms crossed over his chest and grinning widely. When was the last time that Suguru had been visibly – *brightly* –

this happy? “I may have bad news for you, in that case.”

“You’re such a charmer.”

Tentatively, Satoru padded forward, coming to a halt in the middle of the wooden dock, and crouched down, balancing on his toes. The earthy-musty scent of wetness was much stronger out here, clinging pleasantly to the walls of his lungs with each inhale. There was a salty undertone to it and particles of sand equally brushing against his lashes. The wind wasn’t freezing against his face and yet, cold in a way that had goosebumps blooming over his arms despite the comfortable sweater covering them.

Lightning flickered close by, illuminating the planks in dirty yellow, a gaudy canvas whereupon his elongated shadow melted with Suguru’s into a tangled, indistinguishable mass. Just for a split second. And then again. And again.

Satoru hummed mirthfully, the warmth within him a stark, giddy contrast to the coldness crawling underneath his sweater and pants and settling on top of his skin.

“It really is about to rain huh?”

Any moment now. He could *smell* it.

Behind him, featherlight footsteps inched closer.

His *Infinity* flickered as much as the little flames did, unstable and trembling terribly in his clumsy hold. He gritted his teeth as he pulled at the slippery, twitching eel, his muscles stiff with concentration, and *pulled*, throwing it over the walkway like a blanket, thin and unsteady but staying for now - just as the first droplets descended on them, loud and hard, followed by the deafening crackle of thunder right above him.

“There.”

Suguru squatted down on his left, just half a foot behind him, and hummed appreciatively. “Like an invisible umbrella.”

Almost. The drops weren’t falling off like they would on an umbrella; it was more like an invisible screen: they were frozen mid-air, unable to drop any further, new ones landing over the others and drawing bizarre patterns over Satoru and Suguru’s heads.

*It’s not going to hold for long, though.* The realization sat heavily in the pit of his stomach, a sour, squishy thing simmering painfully in acid. Satoru had been patient with his unstable powers, and he *still* was for now. Yet, the uncertainties were testing him. How much could he exert until exhaustion kicked in? Which technique could he safely use? When would his *Six Eyes* spring to life or die without warning, leaving his guts crushed and the world around him a hazy mess?

If not for Suguru’s grounding presence to soak into, he probably would have gone mad on the first day itself. But maybe, he already had? Letting himself fall fully against someone else with the confidence that he could lean on... It *felt* like utter madness.

*Familiar like long forgotten muscle memory. Unfamiliar in its rustiness.*

“Candles belong on a cake, you know?” Satoru said, strangled, unwilling to cave under the emotions welling up within him.

Suguru’s eyebrows twitched; it wasn’t a grimace but looked like the beginning of one. Satoru

didn't linger on the hesitant pause before Suguru spoke next, "I didn't have the time to bake one."

As if either of them had been *busy* – unless hogging up each other's attention counted. But that wasn't what surprised him. Curiously, Satoru folded his arms over his knees and turned around on his toes to squint at Suguru. "You can *bake*?"

He immediately regretted asking when Suguru's expression soured and even worse upon his stilted reply, "The girls had a sweet tooth that could've rivalled yours."

*Shit.*

In the back of Satoru's mind, a memory stirred – of impatient voices, the demand for crepes cutting through Suguru's dramatic villain-monologue, the swirl of black and blond. He pushed it down hastily, his heart skidding into an erratic rhythm, and desperately tried not to focus on the wistful note slithering within Suguru's tone and instead, struggled to get a hold on his racing thoughts.

It was his birthday - well, *night* - and he would be damned if he ruined it for Suguru.

*Change the topic, change the stupid topic!*

"Megumi and Tsumiki aren't that big on sweets," he blurted out like an absolute moron.

The crease between Suguru's brows dug deeper and half of his face was scrunched up in a mixture of a wince and a grimace. Tense silence stretched between, awkwardly drowned out by the incessant, furious patter of rain and the furious roaring of the waves at the end of the dock. They looked especially inviting right now...

"Tsumiki would insist on baking for my birthday," Satoru continued, unable to take the tension sizzling between them, and pointedly ignored the weight of Suguru's gaze as much as the ache throbbing in his chest. "I learned it so I could teach her; there was only so many times their kitchen could survive burning down."

She hadn't been terrible at it, eventually. A fast learner, although sweets really had never been her forte – never sweet enough. But she had been in elementary school when Satoru had found the Fushiguro siblings; obviously, neither of them could nor should have been able to cook and frankly speaking, to this day, Satoru had no idea how they had survived on their own before he had tracked them down. Satoru hadn't minded learning something new, especially since he had been planning to move out of the school and not return to his family's estate. Although, he could have done without Shōko's exaggerated teasing.

Suguru inclined his head, his bangs swaying with the motion. "So, that's how you spent your birthdays? With kids?"

*Didn't you, too?* "That, and harassing everyone for gifts," he winked. Not that he had needed gifts, but it was fun riling up people. It wouldn't be as much fun this year with- He buried that reminder harshly and forced out a short, stiff laugh. "You owe me gifts for eleven years, by the way."

Suguru reached out and flicked his forehead lightly, pressing the rough pad into the spot, a small smile dancing around the corners of his mouth. "Greedy."

And Satoru knew that he should leave it at that - take the warmth tingling through his veins and enjoy the night. Rationality didn't always come easily to him, though. And he had never been good at ignoring the itch of curiosity once it got a firm grip on him.

"Aren't you going to ask?"

Suguru froze as if unsure whether he had misheard; he was so incredibly still that Satoru couldn't even tell whether he was breathing. "Do you *want* to tell me? You don't owe me an explanation."

That might be true, but *Satoru* had brought this up, hadn't he? And at some point, they would have to talk about this, about Satoru's choices that would haunt Suguru like vicious ghosts of the past.

"They were just kids," Satoru sighed, words muffled against his arms. "I wanted – to help."

"Riko was also *just a kid*."

His heart jolted against his ribcage, rattling his bones painfully. Ah.

Riko was a scar hidden away in the deepest recesses of his mind, one that he hadn't allowed himself to linger on in a very long time. He was good at that, at letting wounds scab over and never touch them again, no matter how much they ached. Suguru, on the other hand, kept his own open and bleeding to never forget.

They were really messed up, weren't they?

"So were we," Satoru eventually conceded, leaning further forward until the heat of Suguru's body wafted against his face.

Suguru's dark eyes softened. "Don't you hate *that man*? The brat looks like a mini-him."

Hate was such a strong word. Satoru recollected a lot from both of his fights against Fushiguro Tōji; hatred wasn't among those details. He wasn't like Suguru who felt too much too intensely, never had been, and sometimes that seemed more blessing than curse.

"What's the point? He's already dead."

A long, stilted pause followed.

Then,

"I suppose," Suguru said, although it didn't sound as if he agreed – just relenting. Unwilling to argue. "Does the kid know you killed his dad?"

Satoru squirmed in discomfort. "Na." Although he was certain that Megumi had always had his suspicions about his father's status. It was long overdue that he breached that topic... but he had promised to do so only when Megumi asked, and Satoru wouldn't take that choice away from him. "Megumi doesn't like him either, if that helps," he added cautiously.

Maybe if these two found a common ground, some kind of truce, Suguru, too, could learn to let the past rest and find some peace outside of the resentment that had guided him for so long. The last thing Satoru wanted was for him to regret staying; the mere thought had bile burn in the back of his throat.

Suguru huffed out an amused laugh that eased the skittish nerves crawling underneath Satoru's skin. "You really want me to get along with your students badly, huh?"

"You'll be seeing a lot of each other." That was unavoidable. "It'll be less miserable that way, won't it?"

Tentatively, Suguru leaned forward and peered up at him through his lowered lashes. "I honestly don't care. As long as you're here, I won't be miserable."

Satoru's insides simmered with tingling heat that crawled up his neck and into his cheeks.  
“*Corny!*”

“And what of it?” Suguru chuckled. He reached out, shakily steadying himself on Satoru's shoulders and pushing Satoru back on his heels in the process, tilted his head up, his bangs parting out of the way, and pressed his cold lips underneath Satoru's jaw. Satoru's pulse jumped excitedly against them, the sudden rush of his blood competing with the roaring waves. “Happy birthday, Satoru. Sorry if you wanted some grand party.”

“I don't.” In the past, Satoru had always preferred scooping up in either of their rooms and spending the whole night playing games or watching anime and gobbling down cake and snacks over some pretentious party. That hadn't changed much over the years, just his company had.

But Suguru being here, *alive* and *breathing*, was already the universe granting him his deepest wish. What else could he ever need?

He determinedly smothered the faint stirrings of guilt in the pit of his stomach. *Not today*. He was allowed to have this.

“This is nice,” he insisted and turned his face a little to catch Suguru's lips in a proper kiss. The cold melted in its wake, bit for bit.

Suguru hummed skeptically, the sound pleasantly reverberating through Satoru, and scowled at the sky. “Could've been bet-”

A whirlwind of cursed energy exploded somewhere behind Suguru, so bright it scorched Satoru's nerves to momentarily blind him. He lurched forward with a startled gasp, almost banging his forehead against Suguru's collarbone. His fingers twisted frantically into his hair and dug into his scalp as nausea and sharp pain washed over him. On his shoulders, Suguru's grip tightened painfully.

“*Fuck.*” Satoru was scrambling for the words, a flare of panic clogging his throat, when his *Infinity* quivered threateningly, only a split second before crumbled in on itself like a house of cards.

Rain crashed down on them, hard and fast, the shock hurtling against his chest and cutting off his breathing. Within a few heartbeats, they were completely drenched.

Satoru blearily stared at Suguru's concerned face, opened his mouth soundlessly-

Suguru was knocked off the dock without warning, Satoru himself skidding backward and accidentally swiping off two candles. Confused, he blinked against the water pelting down on him, ears ringing.

“You bastard! What did you do that for?!”

“Where you just gonna leav-”

“Hold him still, my hammer-”

*What. The. Fuck.*

Satoru turned on his side, no easy task due to his clothes sticking heavily to him, waited for the new surge of nausea to ebb away, and squinted through the wetness clinging to his lashes. There were two lumps, one motionless, the other thicker one tumbling through the sand, close to the restless waves of the ocean.

Megumi's Divine Dog was easy to make out, standing to the side as if it were keeping guard, though it was crouched on its front legs unhappily. These dogs had never been fans of bathing.

Pushing himself up a little on the wooden edge, Satoru frowned, a little frustrated by the screens of mud and sand exploding around the other lump and obscuring his sight, accompanied by loud curses and yelling. Was that... *Yūji*? Grappling with Suguru in the sand? Megumi trying to get a kick in, though his foot was caught, and he flipped away? And Maki shoving Megumi aside, almost crushing Suguru's head under her boot? He couldn't quite make out what Nobara was holding in her hands as she leisurely strolled over, but it definitely *didn't* look like her hammer.

He was distracted by a hand appearing in his vision and without thinking, Satoru grabbed it and let himself be pulled up on slippery feet. His face was starting to freeze under the onslaught of cool wind and rain.

"What's going on?"

"We were trapped inside," Yūta said, disgruntled, glaring at the grappling group. He looked like he had rolled in a heap of dust, though the rain was washing off the proofs quickly.

"Trapped?" Foreboding pricked uncomfortable against his consciousness.

Behind Yūta, Panda was loitering in the doorway of the cottage and Toge was peeking out curiously past him. Neither of them seemed willing to step out but that wasn't saving them from being drenched slowly.

Yūta shrugged, lips pursed into a sour half-pout. "It must have been one of *his*" he waved in the general direction of the ocean, "curses. We were unable to leave! Opened one door and just stepped into different hallways."

"We thought it was a loop, at first," Panda chimed in, tone grave. "But it wasn't the *same* hallway. Or maybe it was? Just different parts of it overlapping as we kept moving."

Overlapping space rather than a loop... the latter was easy to break out of, the former was hard to see through. Huh, Suguru *still* possessed that curse, though? No wonder Satoru had sensed their cursed energies only mildly while not sensing any presence in the cottage. It had been the same all those years ago, when he had rescued Utahime and Mei Mei from a mansion that they had been stuck in for days. But...

*Seriously, Suguru?* What the heck did he do that for? Here, Satoru was trying his best to soften him up toward his students and he was actively working against him behind his back?!

"I'm..." Satoru trailed off, uncertainly. Would it be okay for him to apologize? He didn't even have any idea what was going on.

As if reading his mind, Panda snorted. "I'm starting to understand why you two fit so well together. A menace attracts a menace."

"Hey!"

"He's right."

Satoru directed his indignant gaze from a sagely nodding Toge to Yūta and pinched the boy's cheeks in lieu of a scolding. "I've been nothing but good to *you*!"

Yūta didn't protest the treatment, only grinned sheepishly, any trace of sourness dissipating.

“Happy birthday, sensei.”

It took Satoru an embarrassing moment to process the wish and when he did, he wound an arm around Yūta’s shoulder and pulled him into his side, chuckling. “Thanks!”

“Isn’t that cheating, Yūta?!” Panda yelled. He probably meant to sound angry, but his ears were flattened on his head and his fur was drooping down ridiculously, taking away any heat there might have been. With his arms crossed over his chest, he sighed. “Whatever. Happy birthday, Satoru. *We* are not having any fun.” Toge raised his thumbs in agreement.

Next to his ear, Yūta grumbled defensively, “What cheating? I wasn’t the first.”

Confused, Satoru was about to inquire about *the first what?* when his attention was caught by a large water screen shooting up close by. Suguru was trudging back toward the dock, his Rainbow Dragon slithering around him protectively, while the Divine Dog was barking at the ocean in a concerned cadence. Once the waterfall depleted, Megumi’s head broke through the roaring waves and a good distance behind him, Yūji’s. Closer to the shore, Nobara was helping Maki up, both caked by mud from head to toe and their hair a complete mess.

Once Suguru was near, Satoru saw that his bun had come completely undone, dark locks dirty, his clothes, where they weren’t torn, sticking to him like a second skin and his face was painted by dirt and something white with crumbs sprinkled around.

Satoru couldn’t help it - laughter spilled out of him, so much that he had to let go of Yūta and brace himself on his knees. They looked *ridiculous*!

He was so caught up in the hilarity of the situation that he didn’t immediately notice the several stares trained on him in stunned silence. But when he looked around, still vibrating with chuckles and gasping for breath, the kids were already scrambling over and Suguru was eyeing them warningly and his beast growling threateningly. Surprisingly enough, he had managed to put some distance between himself and them, his back toward Satoru and his Rainbow Dragon functioning as a barrier.

“Should’ve tried harder if you wanted to wish him first so badly,” he was saying loudly, and suddenly, Satoru understood.

Delighted, Satoru knelt at the edge of the dock and threw his arms over Suguru’s shoulders, pulling him close. “You are so *petty*,” he laughed. “Did you trap them because you wanted to wish me *first*?”

“He did, he did!” Yūji yelled, pointing an accusing finger at Suguru. “Cheater!”

“It’s called being competitive!” Suguru huffed, unphased. “Fair play’s not gonna get you far in life, kid.”

Yūji spluttered in indignation. “Sensei!”

Distractedly, Satoru frowned at the mass on Suguru’s face and poked a crumb curiously. “Is that a cake?”

At the edge of his vision, Megumi’s head whipped to the side. “You threw the cake at him?!”

“I couldn’t find my hammer!”

“Itadori spent hours making it!”

“It was sacrificed for a good cause, Fushiguro!”

“It certainly improves his looks,” Maki, who was scrubbing her face clean – where were her glasses? –, snorted and behind him, Yūta made a loud, agreeable sound.

Suguru’s fingers snapped around Satoru’s wrist and he glared warningly at him. “Don’t eat that.”

“I wasn’t going to!” Maybe.

“*Sure.*”

Just to be annoying, Satoru put more of his weight on Suguru’s shoulders. “You have such little faith in me.” Petulantly, he added, “But – I would’ve loved some cake.” And Yūji’s food was always heavenly. What a waste.

Yūji took a step forward, not intimidated by the dragon, and raised his chin. “Maybe you should compensate us for ruining sensei’s cake!”

*Technically seen, Nobara ruined it.*

Suguru’s eyes flickered from him to Yūji to the group still being held at bay by his dragon and back to him, mischief sparkling in their dark depths. Before Satoru had the chance to fully register its meaning, Suguru pulled him down by his neck and kissed him slowly. It was clumsy, he was smearing his mess on Satoru’s chin and their noses bumped awkwardly. But Satoru could taste the rain on him, and a faint note of sweetness, and the hint of teeth grazing his lower lip had his insides twitch excitedly.

Compensation, huh?

The reactions were immediate and *loud*.

“Ugh, gross! What’s wrong with you?!”

“Sensei, you can’t smooch him after that stunt!”

“He’s shameless, of course he would...”

“This is the last time we’re doing something nice for you, Satoru. Disgusting!”

“Sensei, *seriously.*”

Amused, Satoru broke off with laughter bubbling in his chest, lips burning headily and the blood in his veins singing. Suguru’s smug smirk was infectious.

“Alright,” Suguru mumbled into his cheek. “Maybe get in first? You’re gonna get sick.”

“Let them through,” Satoru admonished as he straightened up. Yūta had already disappeared inside the cottage and Megumi had dispersed his dog, Satoru realized, although Megumi looked furious enough to summon something else. “You’re *all* gonna get sick!”

“As long as they don’t attack me again like rabid dogs.” Regardless of his words, Suguru waved a hand, and the dragon was gone.

“Not that you didn’t deserve it,” Nobara grumbled sarcastically. She was hugging herself, shivering like a leaf in the wind, teeth chattering, and hastily rushed forward.



Suguru heaved himself up on the dock and tugged at Satoru's arm, dragging him along by the hand, his wet and dirty fingers intertwining with Satoru's and warming them slowly despite the cold downpour of rain. "For being so upset that I wished him first, you brats sure haven't said a word yet!"

A new pandemonium of angry shouts and rapid motions followed.

Satoru smiled, feeling light-headed. This was – nice. Really, really nice. Who could have thought that being happy could be such an easy thing?

## Chapter End Notes

- I guess this could, technically, count as a last chapter. My count of 8 chapters was tentative anyway and the last one I was planning would be a pov-shift, maybe even several ones. So, a bit like an epilogue? I guess. (I haven't decided 100% yet.) While I'll try to start working on it soon (if inspiration strikes), I can't tell when exactly it will be ready. (I have one half of my finals next month and that... definitely needs more attention than I have been giving it T\_T Soo, depending on how well my studying goes, it might take time!)

- For some reason, I really struggle with writing Inumaki. But he, too, deserved some sensei-comfort ☺ (And honestly, Inumaki probably feels awful over how Sukuna killed those people he thought he had saved; definitely agonizing over 'what-ifs' and being frustrated that he's not (wasn't) strong enough to actually fight Sukuna or anyone else on that level.)

- Lol, the kids were jokingly betting between themselves on who would manage to wish Gojo first. They didn't anticipate Geto sabotaging them - but Geto wasn't about to lose to teenagers. Who cares whether he was a part of their silly game!

- There was a some heavier stuff with stsg's lil conversation about Toji that, I feel, needed to happen and should be breached again in the future. Like, Geto's trying for Gojo and he's fully convinced that he will manage and be fine with that alone. He might be! But he's not fully fine now and letting wounds fester never helps. (He doesn't hate Megumi or any of the other students rn; sometimes, it's just hard to completely get over past resentments.) And healing is a slow progress anyway; they don't need to figure everything out now. Baby steps. In the meanwhile, being disgustingly in love does help!

- Personally, I'd say that Geto's relationship with the kids is improving??? ☺ He's being a lil shit for the sake of being a lil shit. As Gojo said, it's fun riling up people :p

- Anyway, I hope some of you enjoyed this chapter! It wasn't an easy one and I'm still a little hmm about it, but I've been working on it for too long already.



# Ease

## Chapter Summary

Yuji, Nobara, Yuta and Megumi reflect a little on things - most importantly, they *see* Geto and Gojo.

## Chapter Notes

Well. Finally? Here we are? Last chapter! (Tbf, chapter 7 was actually the last chapter, this is just hm. A bit of the students and their povs on things, mainly Geto (and stsg)).

It's long... And I might have missed somet stuff while editing, but I'm also. Very done with this specific chapter, so - I'll probably go over it again at a much later date.

That said, you'll find more notes and thoughts at the end! I might try to answer some comments that I haven't yet (\*might\* because it's already very late over here!) but if I don't get to someone's comment, I apologize in advance! I still read it and it still made me very happy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In hindsight, something had been *bound* to give eventually. Peace, Yūji had learned, was nothing but a temporary reprieve, after all.

Yūji would have just liked a warning in advance. *Anything*.

But while a monster might be many things, *considerate* wasn't one of those.

“There's really not a lick of cursed energy in you right now, huh?”

A shiver ran down Yūji's spine, pooling at its base, cold and unnerving.

On a subconscious level, he had been aware that the closer he was getting to the twenty fingers mark, the more slippery his control over his own body was becoming. It was like putting on clothes - the more layers you stack up, the harder it becomes to move. He *knew*, but just like breathing or blinking suppressing Sukuna hadn't been a deliberate, conscious action on his part.

*Before*.

He shouldn't have allowed the Sukuna's deceptive docility to lull him into a false sense of security. Should have known *better*.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

*Move!*

Alarmed, Yūji pulled at his arm violently, rattling his joints painfully. Yet, much to his horror, the fingers wrapped around Gojō-sensei's wrist, with long black nails lodged into flesh, refused to budge. They were numb, dead weight that had plummeted out of the shaky reach of his control.

*Shit.*

Hot panic welled up in his chest.

On the back of his hand, Sukuna's mouth twisted into a sharp grin full of fangs – the movement had Yūji's skin crawl as if a dozen worms were wriggling wildly under it, repulsion churning his guts, and had the bones underneath crunch sickeningly, the sounds deafeningly loud in his ears.

His right cheek twitched incessantly as an extra eye fluttered open on it. The dry skin around it was pinched tightly, waves of hot tingles unleashed with each lazy blink.

Harshly, Yūji bit down on his tongue until he tasted copper, desperate to suffocate the burning urge to retch before it could crawl up his throat.

Sukuna manifesting his own body parts on Yūji had never been a pleasant experience – but he couldn't remember it having been *this* intense, before. Utterly disgusting.

Idly, Gojō-sensei cocked his head sideways questioningly, but seemed otherwise unruffled by the whole thing. He wasn't even paying attention to Sukuna, his gaze settled heavily on Yūji, one eyebrow dipped in concern. "Yūji, are you alright?"

"I'm really sorry about this, sensei!" Yūji hastily scrambled to apologize, heart stuck painfully in the hollow between his throat and chest. "I... I have no idea why this happened."

"Simple," Sukuna drawled. "You're *weak*, brat."

Yūji barely heard him through the accelerated rush of his own blood as his attention whipped toward the man standing – unnaturally still – behind Gojō-sensei.

Getō Suguru was surrounded by a swirl of dark wisps that were coiling around him eagerly like moths attracted by flames. In his left palm, Getō was rolling around two balls of cursed energy like a pair of dices. His other palm slowly settled on Gojō-sensei's arm as he pressed up against him, the tips of his cold fingers grazing Yuji's. He wasn't breaking the grip, though. Just - *holding*. Not that he would have managed to break off Gojō-sensei even if he had tried, given Yūji's inhumane physical prowess.

Sukuna noticed, of course.

Yūji felt a spike of amusement shoot through his veins, causing his hairs to stand on end with dread.

"*That's* what Kenjaku lost to?" Sukuna chuckled, deep and throaty and wafting unbearably loudly over the ruins of the building that they were standing amidst. "All those grand schemes and big plans only to lose to someone this pathetic? What a fool."

"It must be the seventeen fingers!" Yūji babbled in a frantic attempt to drown out Sukuna's taunting voice. His words came out too fast and too high-pitched, though. "He hasn't done this in a while... I'm sorry!"

The panic was spilling over, wrapping his head in suffocating cotton and stringing around his lungs.

Ever since that disgusting stunt in Shibuya, Sukuna hadn't bothered him.

His constant mocking and little game of riling up Yūji, which had long since turned into static noise in a far corner of his awareness, had ceased completely. Yūji hadn't worried about it because even when he wasn't obnoxiously making his presence known, it was impossible to fully forget that Sukuna was within him: a steady stream of horrifying malice mingling with his blood, wicked amusement or scathing disdain constantly clawing at his mind, and that well of bottomless power deep within him that was sealed off to him and yet, thrummed like a strong heartbeat behind his own, filling him with chills.

Sukuna *hadn't needed* to bother him to unnerve him.

*This* wasn't about Yūji.

But the asshole hadn't said anything when Gojō-sensei had returned, nor had he stirred during Yūji's apology to Getō or any time after that. Why *now*, then? Why the sudden interest?

And *why* couldn't Yūji suppress him?! The more he pushed against Sukuna, the firmer his presence seemed to grow; unyielding.

Why wouldn't Sukuna stop moving?! The copper in his mouth was slowly mixing with acidic bile, his head ringing, and his chest-

"Yūji!" Gojō-sensei pulled him closer, gravel crunching under his boots, and lightly flicked his forehead, snapping him out of his spiraling musings. He came to with a gasp, heaving freezing breath after freezing breath, his vision fogged up by tiny, white clouds... His chest was crushingly tight, and the edges of his vision were fuzzy. "Calm down. Slow breaths, hm?"

"Sensei," he croaked pathetically. "I can't move my hand!"

From over Gojō-sensei's shoulder, Getō huffed. "You don't say."

Yūji stilled at that, surprised.

The man *didn't* sound angry. Strained, clearly displeased, his voice a little hoarse - but there was no real anger there. That realization had Yūji exhale slowly, more easily, the cocoon of panic easing up ever so slightly.

Gojō-sensei leaned into Getō and bumped their heads together. "Don't be mean, Suguru!"

"According to your expert opinion," Getō grumbled, "I'm unable not to be mean."

"And am I *wrong*?"

They *both* seemed - calm.

Baffled, Yūji rocked back on the balls of his feet. He could feel his anxious nerves settle down, though.

"So, this is the first time in a long time that this has happened?" Gojō-sensei mused curiously as he raised his wrist between them, peering at the mouth through half-lidded eyes. "Why, did Sukuna *miss* me? I'm honored!"

Behind him, Getō sighed exasperatedly.

On Yūji's right cheek, Sukuna rolled his eye.

“Well, having you back is certainly practical. Or did you forget? Once I get full control of the brat's useless body, you'll be the first I'll dispose of.”

Yūji flinched as if someone had dumped a bucket full of ice over his head.

The ice morphed into images, harshly pattering down on Yūji's mind – flashes of black and golden, two girls cut into pieces under a merciless butcher's knife, a puddle of blood and chunks of flesh remaining in their wake. A massive fireball crashing down on a group of terrified, frozen people under Sukuna's delighted laughter and clapping. A whole living area obliterated clean, the empty curtain of death dropped over it; lives snuffed out as easily as the flames of a candle.

Fury and disgust coiled in his chest, sending his heart into a frenzied flurry.

Warm wetness trickled out of the corner of his mouth.

“We'll see about that.” Gojō-sensei was smiling, the curve of his mouth cutting, belying the faux-lightness of his tone.

Sukuna cackled in delight. “We *will*. It doesn't matter how strong you are, as long as you're shackled down to mortal whims, you *will* lose.”

Getō shifted even closer, letting his head loll over Gojō-sensei's shoulder. Unlike his lazy pose, his gaze was sharp and brimming with intensity. “So cocky for someone stuck in a teenager's body with no autonomy of his own.”

Yūji's instincts blared in warning as soon as Sukuna's focus switched toward Getō again, even more so as a spark of morbid amusement that was *not* his flared in the pit of his stomach.

“Isn't that why he got sealed to begin with? Useless, human attachment? Disgraceful.”

What... Sensei had never mentioned *how* exactly he had gotten sealed. Between Yūji, Fushiguro, Kugisaki and the senpais they only had *assumptions*. Yet, Sukuna sounded confident, as if he *knew* exactly what had happened.

Yūji loathed it.

Getō's grip on sensei's arm tightened and the wisps around him bristled at the same time. Gojō-sensei turned his neck and lifted his free hand to coil the bangs that always seemed to fall loosely into the other man's face around his forefinger. He pulled, just a light, gentle tug, and Yūji watched in surprise as the hard edges in Getō's expression immediately softened with warmth.

Over his grinding bones, Sukuna scoffed.

“I'm actually surprised that you haven't tried to kill the brat yet. Revenge and getting rid of most of me - it shouldn't even be a question. Or don't you want any revenge?” Sukuna *crooned* sickeningly sweetly. “Those girls were so desperate to get your body back.” Yūji flinched, dread freezing his blood, making his movements as he tried to yank away frenzied and stiff. *No, no, no. Shut up, shut up!* “Fools, really. You don't even care half as much, huh?”

The warmth bled out instantly, replaced with frost that glaciated Getō's already dark gaze. Yūji wasn't sure if it was the natural cold lingering in the air or whether the temperature around them

had really dropped, but he couldn't quite suppress a violent shiver. Getō's hand that had been holding the balled curses was twisted into a fist, streams of thick smoke slithering out between the cracks of his fingers.

"*Suguru.*"

Abruptly, Getō let go of Gojō-sensei's arm and instead, pressed his forehead against sensei's shoulder. He murmured something that Yūji didn't hear. Under Gojō-sensei slowly stroking his hair, he seemed to relax more and more. The wisps of cursed energy settled down, once again lapping at Getō's body eagerly.

Within Yūji, Sukuna's mild disappointment warred with his glee.

Gojō-sensei's mouth turned downward; his own lightheartedness gone.

Yūji had no idea how Getō had calmed down so fast – there was so much raw *anger* and *hatred* raging within him that he couldn't contain, whipping against his mind and infesting his veins. How could the man control himself like that? Yūji would- he-

He clutched his arm with his free hand and *wrenched* it off. Shockingly enough, Sukuna's fingers came off with ease. Caught off-guard, Yūji stumbled back a few steps and slipped over a chunk of broken stone, crashing into a pile of woods and gasping for freezing air as his other hand stifled Sukuna's mouth as hard as he could. He barely registered the *plop* resonating through the night.

"*Bastard!*" he hissed furiously, teeth clattering. "Get lost! Get lost, get lost, get lost!"

Sukuna only cackled in response.

When he did disappear, though, it infuriated Yūji that much more because it *wasn't* because of him. It was Sukuna's own choice.

*Weak.*

"Yūji. Don't look so devastated," Gojō-sensei admonished gently. "It's not your fault. You're exhausted – we've been out for *hours* already."

Gojō-sensei didn't seem exhausted at all despite having run throughout the whole city mostly without his cursed energy, and if Getō was tired, then he hid it well. Yūji had more stamina than most people – he should be *fine*!

*Weak.*

Someone crouched next to him before Gojō-sensei's fingers skidded over his forehead reproachfully. They left tingling trails in their wake, surprisingly warm. "I can *hear* you thinking. You really need to stop blaming yourself for everything Sukuna does."

"I've told him that, too," Getō chimed in. "Stop taking responsibility for Sukuna's actions – if you keep doing that, you'll be miserable."

He wished it were as simple as they made it sound.

Instead of reacting to their words, Yūji laid down his back, not minding the hard surface and jagged edges digging into him, and squinted up at them, frowning when he noticed Getō still attached to Gojō-sensei's back. "Aren't you mad?"

For a moment too long, it was deathly silent, and he almost regretted asking. When Getō replied, his words came out muffled, teetering on the verge of sleepiness. Maybe he *was* exhausted... “Oh, I’m *seething*. Not at you, though.”

In the back of his mind, Sukuna scoffed.

“Maybe, once I’ve eaten all the fingers,” Yūji said tentatively, the words tumbling out in a rush as he averted his gaze and fixated it on the star-lit sky. “*You* could execute me. If that’ll help with the anger.”

Gojō-sensei went stiff. The fingers on his forehead glided off, finding his aching wrist instead. “Do you still want that?”

Yūji furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “What?”

“After you’ve consumed all twenty fingers, what do you want to do?”

*What.* He lurched up into a sitting position and gaped at the man as if he had gone mad. His pulse was racing dizzily. “Wasn’t the deal that I would be executed? That’s the only way to get rid of Sukuna, isn’t it?”

“Oi.” Getō didn’t move from his position, but his eyes peeked over sensei’s shoulder, sharp and calculating. “He asked you what *you* want, not what you *think* you should do.”

What he *wanted*?

His mind was blank.

When Yūji had agreed to the deal, he hadn’t wanted to die. Agreeing to help the school find the missing fingers had been a lousy lifeline to cling to in order to live *just a little longer*. He had made his peace with that decision, though. Resigned. But then...

The Yasohachi Bridge incident... Shibuya...

There was so much blood on his person - he was drenched in it. And there would be more for as long as Sukuna existed.

Wasn’t it better to die? Bring an end to this madness?

Fushiguro and Kugisaki would be sad, though. And everyone else, too.

Nanami might be disappointed. His grandpa definitely would be, wouldn’t he?

And Gojō-sensei... Yūji stared at him, at the warmth burning in his all-seeing eyes, the patience etched into his features, the troubled dip of his mouth. *What do you want to do?*

“It’s fine if you don’t know,” Getō continued. “You have time to think about it. It’s your life, you don’t owe it to anyone.”

That didn’t sound right. “But Sukuna...”

“Will be *my* concern,” sensei said. “I was going to let you decide anyway. *It is* your life – even if you told me in the moment of your execution that you want to live, you *would* live.”

Something in his chest loosened, coming undone, pieces of it clogging his throat. His vision started to swim. “You make it sound so easy.”



Getō snorted at that. “He loves doing that. It’s the inflated ego.”

Gojō-sensei tugged reproachfully at Getō’s bangs. “Shut up!”

Easy. Both of them... made everything seem easy. Simple.

Yūji’s shoulders drooped as if a heavy weight fell off them. Still... Doubts were persistently nagging at him. He leaned forward, staring down at where Gojō-sensei was feeling over his dislocated bone. “Sensei, wouldn’t it be selfish if I decided to live?”

The longer he lived, the more victims Sukuna claimed, after all.

Gojō-sensei hummed thoughtfully. “Do you think I am selfish?”

Yūji’s head whipped up, startled. “What?”

The smile dancing around sensei’s lips was wry. “Didn’t you know? The reason for why curses started to evolve rapidly in recent times was because of me – but I’m still living my life. Is that selfish?”

Yūji glanced at Getō who was squinting at Gojō-sensei. “You’re hardly at fault for being born!” Had anyone ever given sensei shit over that? Ridiculous!

Gojō-sensei’s smile stretched wider, curving into a smirk. “And you’re not for wanting to help people. Sometimes,” he added after a pause, his tone considering, “our good intentions backfire. That’s just life. But you can make next time better only if you live, right?”

*Huh.* Yūji tried to swallow the lumps in his throat, but they didn’t budge. Laughter bubbled in his chest, filling it with buzzing heat.

“Sensei,” Yūji teased, his voice choked and grin watery, “you’re surprisingly wise! Is it the hair?”

Gojō-sensei gasped in mock-offense, even clutched his heart. “Surprisingly? My *hair*?! Yūta’s also been cracking jokes at my expense! Whose bad influence is this?”

“Yours, probably,” Getō chuckled. He wound one arm around Gojō-sensei’s chest and reached for his face, squeezing his cheeks. “Also, *yes*, you are actually quite selfish, Satoru. Remember breakfast?”

“*Shuguru!*”

Yūji watched with a smile as they ended up grappling over the ruins of someone’s home.

So easy. They made being happy seem *easy*.

Yūji *wanted*.

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It was pouring in Prague.

Underneath the black felt eyepatch, Nobara’s empty eye socket throbbed in tandem to the patter of rain.

It took every ounce of willpower for her not to press a palm over it, to reach up and touch the areas around it, make sure that the skin was still there and not peeled off to expose flesh and bones. The tips of her fingers itched with impulses, bordering on painful.

This was nothing like the faint phantom pains that haunted her every once in a while. Those were duller, more nuisance than anything else once she had gotten used to them. *This*, though...

It was driving her *mad*.

Just moments ago, in the dusty halls of the school, she had been perfectly fine.

*Must be the goddamn weather.*

She groaned appreciatively when warmth coiled around her as the automatic doors closed behind them, thawing the layer of frost that had settled over Nobara's veins. The warm air – heavy with a myriad of sweet scents and those of new, ironed clothes – mixed with the scent of musk, fresh earth still clinging to the roof of Nobara's mouth. She barely registered it.

Nobara came to a slippery halt step behind Gojō-sensei, her high-boots squeaking wetly over the smooth tiles. She let her gaze flit around the shelves stuffed full of folded clothes and the handful of mannequins and racks right in front of them. On her left side, posters of female models showing off a winter collage - why were the colors so dull? - were hung up and underneath them were more shelves dug into the wall. Between both, there stood several racks showing off long coats, jackets and large sweaters, and small, spinning islands displaying bags and shoes and, at the far end where they had just entered from, diverse accessories.

Soothing piano notes played in the background, intermingling with the buzz of voices filling the cozy shop.

The warmth did nothing to lessen her pain, though.

In an attempt to distract herself, Nobara cleared her throat pointedly, "I have two questions, sensei."

Without bothering to turn away from whatever he was rummaging through, Gojō-sensei hummed questioningly.

Nobara stamped down the spike of irritation flaring up in her chest. That was *fine*. She *didn't* need his full attention. Not at all.

"One." She jabbed her right thumb over her shoulder, her other hand resting on her hip. "Why is *he* here too?"

A quick glare revealed that the 'he' in question – aka one Getō Suguru – wasn't even looking at them, though Nobara *saw* that eye-roll before he disappeared around the corner at the end of the aisle, dark scarf and coat fluttering behind him. *Rude*.

Ieiri-san had told them over lunch recently – and Nobara was still astonished by how much the older woman enjoyed gossiping about her schoolmates – that Getō had been *very* popular with people, specifically with girls back in the day. '*He could wrap anyone around his finger, that sweet talker. Too bad for the girls that he was already a lost cause.*'

Either that was a rose-tinted, unintentional lie or those people and girls had shitty tastes. And really, Nobara had every right to be doubtful looking at how much the guy riled up Utahime-sensei on the regular - and unlike Gojō-sensei's obnoxious and exaggerated antics that were in-your-face obvious, Getō's taunts were delivered wrapped in fake charm and agitating humor. Actually, he

had the talent to piss off anyone without being obvious about it. A little impressive, maybe.

Still, how could Itadori insist that the guy was *nice*, deep down? Where? The abyss of his soul? He might be fun, maybe. She couldn't deny that it was hilarious to watch Getō annoy Fushiguro, and teasing Fushiguro about the guy was *gold*. So, he was entertaining and definitely someone to get on your team during game nights, if they ever held game night. But *nice* was not it.

Then again, aside from Itadori and Okkotsu-senpai, who was really 'nice'?

Gojō-sensei shrugged innocently as he tried to hand her a smooth fabric that she waved off hastily. Grey wasn't her color. "To shop, obviously."

Seriously?

"You do know that you're not going to die when you separate for a few hours," she grumbled sullenly.

It wasn't that she cared all that much. Getō might be a menace sometimes, sure. *Nobara* wasn't on his bad side, though. But that was beside the point: She had *seen* these two together – who hadn't, by now? – and she wasn't eager to play third wheel to sickeningly intimate displays on a day that was supposed to be about *her*.

*Ugh*, perhaps it was the pain chafing away at her patience that made her so irritable.

She took one look at the frog eyepatch Gojō-sensei was inspecting – the saucer eyes were creepier than those of Fushiguro's shikigami, *goddamn* – ripped it out of the man's grip and threw it back into the pile that Gojō-sensei had fished it out from. Without warning, she pushed him aside and started to focus on the rack next to the pile, instead. If she let him pick her stuff for her, then she would leave this shop stuffed in a bad imitation of some motley cosplay. Besides, she *hated* frogs.

Next to her, Gojō-sensei crossed his arms over his chest and chuckled, a low, genuinely delighted sound that had her stiff shoulders droop ever so slightly.

"Suguru was feeling a little down," he eventually conceded. Was that a *pout* she heard in his voice? "So, I thought that he needed a change of scenery!"

For a heartbeat, Nobara was tempted to prod. She was incredibly curious by nature – you couldn't offer her a small piece of a cake and not expect her to shovel down the *whole* treat. Plus, now that she thought about it... Hadn't Itadori been acting a tad oddly last night after returning from an evening of scouring Chiba with these two? Lost in his own head, constantly spacing out and falling asleep on Fushiguro's divine dog in the middle of Fushiguro showing him pictures on his phone? Maybe both cases were related?

But Itadori had seemed his usual self again today. Well, more than that – his smile had been brighter, his gaze fully unclouded for once and his steps light as if some weight had dropped off him. Hence, why neither she nor Fushiguro had asked.

She sighed, resigned, and instead, mumbled, "Two: We could've shopped in Japan."

"Change of scenery!" he repeated cheerfully. "And anyway, aren't you always eager to travel? Isn't this much more exciting than boring Kyoto?"

*Well.*

Of course, she didn't hate being taken on an impromptu trip abroad – she was happy that between

the health issues, catching up with missed events and personally checking out the situation across Japan sensei hadn't forgotten his promise to buy her a new eyepatch, trivial as it might seem – but... Being away from home, from *everyone* else, left her anxious. The ache rippling through one half of her face was making everything worse.

Japan was familiar. The air in Japan was oversaturated by the stench and sensation of cursed energy. Here... it was different. Too fresh, too unblemished. Too peaceful.

Her instincts were high on alert, ready in case something might happen, although her mind knew that the chance of that was laughably small. It put her on edge, her agitated nerves restlessly churning through her veins, her ears strained in case her phone might ring.

She shook herself out her musings, focus snapping back to task, and dropped a neon-pink headband in favor of inspecting a bathing cap that reminded her of lettuce. Ugly. She should get it for Fushiguro. Maybe a matching one for Itadori.

"I'm just saying," she continued absent-mindedly, "what with your condition and our luck, we might end up being stuck here!"

He was energetic and in good spirits, but Nobara didn't trust it. For all that Ieiri-san assured them that he was getting better, he still hadn't regained full control of his cursed energy influx – or the lack thereof – and Nobara dreaded being stuck out here, far away from home. With lovesick fools.

Why didn't she ask Maki-senpai to tag along? *Idiot.*

"See, and that's where Suguru comes in!"

Nobara stilled, head lowered, side-bangs parting. Horror rendered her speechless for a moment. "You can't be serious."

When they had returned from the beach, she had joined Maki-senpai and the others on Getō's six-legged bird curse – and that was *not* an experience she was eager to repeat. Having gotten queasy in front of Maki-senpai once had been embarrassing enough; she was glad that she hadn't thrown up on anyone. That thing flew like a headless chicken.

Gojō-sensei's teleportation was better.

And cooler. Not that she would ever tell him, though.

"You worry over nothing," Gojō-sensei laughed as he leaned over her – freaking giant – to grab something. "How about this? Looks pretty nice!"

*Woah.* It did. The patch was formed like a rose, colored a wine red with five swirling petals, and deep green leaves spreading from its edges, the top three larger than the several lower ones. When she touched it, it was smooth against her skin. A sweet, floral scent clung to the material.

Having a wild rose growing out of her missing eye...

"Not bad." Her gaze swept over more quirky designs hanging off the other side of the rack, lingering on a heart. "I want more, though!"

Gojō-sensei stepped back without a fuss. "Go right ahead. Grab anything you want."

Surprised, Nobara twirled around, both arms raised very slowly to indicate the magnitude of the shop. "*Anything?*"

Gojō-sensei's eyes twinkled in amusement. "Sure."

It had to be nice to be filthy rich.

*Well*, Nobara thought as she inched toward the bags, holding her new eyepatch and the lettuce-cap, *I'm not going to decline that offer*. "Aren't you going to get anything?"

"Na." He walked up to the large window spanning over the entirety of the front wall, the glass covered by a myriad of water droplets and more still pouring down - the skin around Nobara's eyepatch twitched agitatedly at the sight -, placed his palms on the windowsill and leaned back on them. "We can stop at a café later."

*Definitely not going to decline.*

Bag. Shoes. Maybe a cute, large pullover. Would Maki-senpai like something?

"Suguru!" Gojō-sensei suddenly shouted and Nobara didn't have to look to know that he was waving like a madman. A set of heavy steps strolled past behind Nobara, smokey laughter trailing in their wake. "What did you get?"

"*Stuff*," Getō said fondly, plastic rustling.

Resigned, Nobara crouched down to inspect the bags in the lower layers, and wiped a hand down the aching side of her face, sighing deeply. *And it starts.*

"Just these?"

"What else did you want me to buy?"

"Clothes, maybe?! You can't live in mine forever!"

Getō aw-ed in mock hurt. "And thus you decline me a token of your love!"

Despite herself, Nobara glanced over.

Gojō-sensei, now sitting on the windowsill, was rummaging through a plastic bag, frowning ever so slightly, the tip of his tongue poking out from the corner of his mouth. Getō was standing pressed up against his stretched-out legs, one hand buried in the pocket of his dark pants and the other draped over Gojō-sensei's shoulder, fingers stroking the side of his throat. He was smiling a small and yet, soft, warm smile as he watched sensei.

"And people call *me* dramatic!"

"How blasphemous of them."

*Really? In front of me?*

Yet, Nobara felt herself smiling. They were ridiculous.

Truth to be said, she couldn't understand how they did it - having spent over a decade apart, Getō dying to Gojō-sensei, the body-possession ordeal, and... They just fit seamlessly back together. Looking at them right now, no one would be able to guess that they had been estranged longer than they had actually known each other.

Nobara would have never thought Gojō Satoru to be someone to *love* so wholly, even if his taste was questionable. Despite his silly antics and overexaggerated dramatics, he had always seemed

untouchable. Someone walking in a different world than everyone else.

Getō hadn't necessarily joined him on that path nor dragged him down into the normal mortal sphere alongside himself, but with him next to Gojō-sensei it became staggeringly obvious: Gojō Satoru was as human as anyone else. He didn't mind relying on someone else, he was content letting Getō fuss over him where he refused to display weakness to his students, and even after everything that had happened - the deaths, the losses - and everything that was waiting to crash down on them, he managed to be... *happy*.

Nobara was loath to admit it, but watching these two idiots being stupid together was comforting. Like she could finally, after agonizing months, *relax*.

Thunder roared outside, startling her out of her trance.

Her face hurt.

“Kugisaki! Here.”

Nobara barely caught the medication strips thrown at her face, heart pounding erratically in her chest. “Hey!”

Getō raised a judgemental eyebrow at her. “If you're in pain, just say it. Why try to tough it out?”

*Oh*. Painkillers? That was *almost* nice if not for the scathing tone.

She hadn't been trying to 'tough it out'! Heck, she hadn't even been in pain before arriving here! Nobara was a lot of things - stubborn, prideful in certain matters, unwilling to ever admit loss - unreasonable wasn't among those, though.

Of course, confessing her weakness hadn't been easy.

They were jujutsu sorcerers living in a cursed-infected country and thus, got hurt all the time. Nobara herself had *died*. Scars simply meant that they had *survived* - and she had heard Gojō-sensei reiterate this repeatedly, relief always outweighing the pride in his voice - but letting them bother you even long after just felt like defeat. As if you survived and yet, were still stuck in that painful moment that warranted survival to begin with. As if you were unable to let go. *Weak*.

But sensei hadn't treated it as a pitiful weakness.

So, she had confessed about her phantom pains to Fushiguro and Itadori recently, in the middle of a night spent huddled underneath blankets, munching on snacks. And to Maki-senpai afterward when the boys kept asking her every half an hour if she was okay.

This here was different!

Gojō-sensei's head whipped up in alarm. He was clutching a weird hat with long, drooping ears on its head, his mouth was pinched into a tight line. “You're hurting?”

*Oh, for-* “It's nothing. It only started when we came here!”

“Must be the rain,” he mumbled thoughtfully and Getō hummed affirmatively.

Nobara fluttered the strip in front of herself, smiling brightly in an attempt to change the topic. “How considerate of you!”

“Right? I'm a nice guy like that.” With a quick glance at Gojō-sensei, he added, “Although you

could use your *Reversed Cursed Technique* to lessen the pain. Isn't Satoru teaching you?"

That hadn't occurred to her. But... She grimaced at the mere thought. "It's really nothing."

Getō's lips slowly curled into a knowing smirk, dark eyes glinting with amusement. "Too complicated to use on something so mundane?" With a teasing pinch to Gojō-sensei's cheek, he added, "Satoru, looks like your student is struggling."

And what if she was? It was *hard*, okay?! And it sucked out way too much of her cursed energy, currently. Trying to apply it to dull chronic pain... *Nope*. A waste of energy.

"At least, I *can* use it," Nobara grumbled sourly as she heaved herself back to her feet.

Gojō-sensei raised the next hat that he had fished out of the bag - one matching his own, just in blue rather than white - and slapped its ears against Getō's jaw. "Stop harassing her!"

"I'm *helping*!" Getō scoffed, grabbing sensei's wrist.

They were awful.

"What *are* those?"

Getō's expression instantly softened up. "They look a little like cinnamoroll. Satoru used to be fond of it."

*Oh?* Bags forgotten, Nobara moved close to them, eager and gleeful. "Really? What else was he 'fond' of?"

Getō grinned mischievously. "You want all the dirt on him?"

Immediately, Gojō-sensei tugged at Getō's arm warningly, whining, "Suguru! Leave me some dignity!"

"What dignity?"

"Suguru!"

Nobara pressed out a pill from the strip and, surprised, accepted the bottle of water that Getō was offering her - while pressing the hat down on Gojō-sensei's head and tugging at the ears to pull him closer. Gojō-sensei's whining and fake pouting slowly ceased, replaced by sudden guffaws.

"Please, as if Shōko hasn't already emptied all the skeletons from our closets."

"Age has turned her into a gossip aunty," Getō agreed, amused.

Nobara regarded him critically. Gojō-sensei had claimed that he had been feeling down, yet there was no trace of that reflected in his expression. It seemed common - Getō was often grumpy or in a dark mood, but as soon as he was in Gojō-sensei's presence, the clouds around him started to part slowly. He made sensei happy, obviously. And sensei clearly made him happy, too, despite the hubris piled up around them.

They were good for each other.

Nobara's blood singed with tingling warmth, anxiety forgotten.

Well. Maybe she didn't regret having tagged along with these two.

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“It’s useless.”

Yūta startled so vehemently that he almost bashed the back of his head against solid stone. He clutched his chest, feeling his erratic heartbeat against his palm, and huffed out a ragged breath, watching its foggy cloud slowly dissolve into freezing air. On his left, Gojō-sensei chortled in amusement; heat crawled into his frozen cheeks.

A brief glance up revealed that if Mai had noticed, then she didn’t show it. Her attention was fully focused on the two people going at it on the field in front of them.

Maki-san was just hauling herself out of a human shaped crater with the support of her thick staff, her face distorted into a furious grimace, dirt and scrapes and bruises mottling the visible skin on her arms and lower legs where her leggings had been ripped. In stark contrast, Getō stared down at her impassively, arms crossed behind his back and a giant blob-looking curse peeking from behind him. He had nothing but a faint bruise on his jaw to show, annoyingly enough.

Far up on the bleachers at the side, Panda and Inumaki-kun were huddled together in a corner, lost in their own world.

“The training?” he directed toward Mai as he pulled his knees underneath his thick jacket, pressing them against his chest, and hugged them. It was *so* cold. Why had they decided to sit on the freezing ground... “Why? I think Maki-san is improving.”

She did get a good hit in, earlier. And yet, Yūta could see her frustration growing steadily in the frenzied edges bleeding into her motions and sucking the precision out of her moves.

How come Getō was this good, anyway? The man hadn’t been in possession of his own body for almost a year - and yet, he flitted around seamlessly. At least, *now*. Maybe he had just adapted fast? *And* improved? Yūta’s fight against him was a bit blurry in his memories - most of it blurred red by raging anger - but his movements seemed faster and crisper, more impactful. Rather playful, too.

He wouldn’t know for sure without fighting the guy himself. And Yūta wasn’t sure if he could do that as a mere *spar*. Now, he wasn’t a petty person and didn’t want to hold on to wilting grudges, especially because he *knew* that *this* Getō wasn’t the same maniac from last year, filled with hatred and a callous disregard of human life. He had *seen* as much. But... He simply couldn’t help but worry. Wasn’t that why he watched each of these sessions? Just to be *sure*?

Maki-san truly was amazing for being able to put her resentment aside and seek help from someone who had looked down on her so terribly.

Next to him, Mai snorted derisively. “Of course, *you* would say that.”

Yūta pursed his lips. What was *that* supposed to mean?

“Isn’t he cute like that?” Gojō-sensei chimed in gleefully. He pressed up against Yūta’s side, gravel crunching under his shifting weight, and draped his arm over Yūta’s head as he stretched on his toes to beam at Mai. “So supportive! What a great friend!”

“*Sensei!*” Yūta whined in protest, tone teetering on high-pitched from embarrassment. Though, he didn’t push Gojō-sensei off - he was warm...



“What? Am I *lying*?”

Yūta huffed, more fond than exasperated.

Mai pulled her long coat tighter around herself, crossed her arms in front of herself and placed her gloved hands on her face. She trailed Maki-san’s steps as they marched destruction on the training field - they had almost unearthed the entirety of it; clean-up would not be impressed.

“She can try as hard as she wants to. Maki isn’t going to improve much more than this.”

Yūta shared a confused glance with Gojō-sensei who cocked his head sideways, eyes piercing sharp. “How are you so sure?”

For a long moment, Mai stayed silent. Her face was impassive, giving nothing away, and her gaze glazed over, definitely not seeing the fight taking place down there. Then, very quietly, barely audible, “We’re *twins*.”

Yūta felt as if there was more to that statement. A hidden weight cracking Mai’s voice, forcing her to hunch over ever so slightly as if in pain, but invisible to him. It had a dreadful unease stir in the pit of his stomach.

Gojō-sensei, whose arm had dropped to Yūta’s shoulder, had gone slightly stiff, eerily silent.

“You’re twins,” Yūta repeated slowly, thoughts racing. “So, she can’t improve *by herself*?”

“She can’t with me, either,” Mai grumbled, rolling her eyes for good measure. “Not that I would help her.”

A small smile tugged at Yūta’s lips. “Of course.”

Abruptly, Mai’s head snapped around and her glare burned on the side of his face. “I *mean* it.”

“I didn’t say you didn’t,” he assured her.

Her glare only intensified. “You’re a little shit, huh? Who would’ve thought.”

Gojō-sensei nodded sagely. “Someone’s been a bad influence over him.”

*Really*. Could they really blame him for doubting her words?

Mai claimed not to care for her sister and yet, after Shibuya, for as long as Maki-san had been in critical condition, Mai hadn’t left her side. Everyone had believed that she would eventually leave once it was clear that Maki-san was out of danger but that, obviously, *hadn’t* happened. Mai had basically moved into here.

Then again, a lot of people seemed to have designated their school as a safe haven of sorts.

Utahime-san had been coming around regularly and so had her students, even after Gojō-sensei’s return. Yūta didn’t really mind. It was actually nice to have life buzzing in the otherwise too empty buildings and fields - it was *homely*, in a way.

Poor Fushiguro, though, was dismayed by it. According to him, stomaching Chōsō was one thing, tolerating Tōdō was another, but both of them in the *same* room with Itadori... The other evening, Yūta had witnessed him freezing in the middle of hallway on his way to the kitchen as soon as he had heard Chōsō and Tōdō’s voices trickle out alongside Itadori and Kugisaki’s - something about using a knife to cut vegetables and not blood -, sigh very deeply and turn on his heel and *bolt* as if

Gojō-sensei was chasing him with a camera.

Since the higher-ups were upset with a lot of them, it made sense that the Kyoto folks sought refuge here rather than their own basically higher-up owned school.

As for Mai...

“If you believe that Maki-san can’t improve, why are you here?”

While Mai had been living with them and *had* been hovering around her sister more often than not when Maki-san wasn’t out in the field, Yūta hadn’t seen them spending much time together, let alone Mai accompanying her to her training. She wasn’t very fond of that, Yūta had noticed - *fighting*, in general. Watching Maki-san head off to face curses, specifically. There was always a tightness around her eyes when that happened and something heavy lurking around her when she stared after her sister’s back.

Yūta wondered if Maki-san knew.

A deafening *CRASH* thundered through his musings. He jerked forward, palms slapping down, one knee grating over the ground, the other foot ready to haul him up, and heart rattling painfully against his ribcage. At the edge of his awareness, he noted Gojō-sensei’s fingers lightly resting against elbow.

Maki-san had crashed into the bleacher three rows under where Inumaki-kun and Panda were lounging. They briefly looked up from Inumaki-kun’s phone, more confused than shocked, before resuming whatever they were watching. Their nonchalant reaction had Yūta rock back on the balls of his feet, relieved. Although he couldn’t fully suppress the concern thrumming through his vein when Maki-san just laid in the wreckage.

Mai scoffed. “Watching Maki get her ass beaten, duh.”

*Well.*

“We’re done for today,” Getō announced cheerfully - Gojō-sensei was rubbing off on him - and waved off his cursed spirit. He didn’t even wait for Maki-san to get up before turning his back to her, sauntering over to them as he rolled down the arms of his black shirt and re-tied his loose bun tighter.

On cue, Mai, with half of her face buried in her huge scarf, strolled over to where Maki-san was lying.

“Mai,” Gojō-sensei called after her, his tone gente. She paused, inclining her head questioningly without turning around. “If something is bothering you, you should talk to Maki. Or anyone, really but *especially* Maki.”

She raised her shoulders up to her ears before resuming her path silently.

Yūta watched as she crouched down next to Maki-san, guts churning uncomfortably. “Sensei, is she right about Maki-san not improving?”

Gojō-sensei furrowed his eyebrows in concern. “It’s less about improving and more about tapping into her full potential. I’m not sure what’s preventing her from that.”

Anxiety stirred in the pit of his stomach. There had to be a way, right? Maki-san was working *so hard*! “But you do believe that she can do it, right?”

Gojō-sensei opened his mouth, ready to reply, but was interrupted by Getō suddenly perching down in front of him. Wordlessly, he pushed his hands into Gojō-sensei's coat, down his shoulders, jostling the shades that had been hanging off the first button in the process. Sensei clicked his tongue in a half-hearted reproach, though he pressed both his fluffy gloves against Getō's red ear, earning himself an appreciative hum.

Yūta, feeling embarrassment flushing his face, *decidedly* stared at his shoes. *Shameless*, he could hear Fushiguro's voice groan in the back of his mind.

Quietly, Getō said, "Didn't *that guy* also have a Heavenly Restriction?"

At that, Gojō-sensei stilled, drawing Yūta's attention back toward them. Sensei was biting down on one half of his lower lip, long eyelashes fluttering.

Curiosity stirred in Yūta's chest. *What guy?*

"But he had no cursed energy," Getō continued slowly. His expression was... blank. *Detached*. It had discomfort slithering through Yūta's insides, cold and slippery. "At all."

For a long moment, Gojō-sensei just stared at him intently. There was something in his features that Yūta couldn't put his finger on, something that had his own breath hitch and heart ache. When he spoke again, his tone was soothing, "And Maki does, little as it may be. You think *that's* the issue?"

The detachment cracked ever so slightly as Getō leaned further into sensei's space. "Maybe?"

Unable to contain himself any more, Yūta asked, "Doesn't everyone have *some* cursed energy, though? *Can* you get rid of it?"

They *both* were frowning, but Yūta couldn't help but focus his attention on Getō.

For a while now, he had been wondering how far this guy was willing to go for Gojō-sensei - because Yūta was in no delusion that everything that Getō was doing currently was for Gojō-sensei. Giving up his old plans, playing nice with all of them, *tolerating* Maki-san. *Love is the most twisted curse of them all*, sensei had told him once. Was this second life Getō Suguru's curse, then? And if so, was that a bad thing, necessarily? They were jujutsu sorcerers - curses flowed in their blood.

Yet... Tolerating was one thing. He couldn't imagine Gojō-sensei *forcing* Getō to train Maki-san. If Getō had been truly uncomfortable with that prospect and posed a threat to Maki-san, there was no way that sensei would have allowed this.

During their sparring... And now, while talking about Maki-san and her Heavenly Restriction - the thing that made her more akin to non-sorcerers and what had caused Getō's repulsion for her... Yūta couldn't make out a single trace of resentment. And he was very intimate with what that looked like on Getō Suguru.

Yūta wasn't sure what to think of that.

Eventually, Getō said, "We still have the remains of the Prison Realm."

*Oh?*

Gojō-sensei instantly perked up, eyes glimmering with excitement. "You think if we let Tsukumo examine it..."

Getō shrugged. “Worth a try.”

“You’re really trying to help Maki-san.” The words slipped out before Yūta registered them.

Stubbornly, he swallowed the nervous lump trying to squeeze into his throat and held Getō’s dark gaze when it settled on him like a heavy blanket. An amused smile curved around Getō’s mouth.

“Why? Should I not?”

“I’m just surprised,” Yūta murmured honestly. “You hated her.”

“I wouldn’t say that I like her now,” Getō huffed. Gojō-sensei pulled at both his earlobes for that remark, eliciting a startled hiss from him. “It’s true! But I’m apparently a changed man now, so I should do some charity every once in a while.”

Gojō-sensei squeezed Getō’s face between both his palms, shaking his head a little too hard.

“You’re *awful*!”

“That says more about you than me, dear,” Getō chuckled.

They were affectionate rather than shameless, Yūta decided. Although it was still odd to see his sensei this *intimate* with anyone, the happiness he radiated was contagious.

Warmth simmered in his blood, thawing at the frost that had seeped into it. Quietly, he announced, “I still don’t like you.”

“I’m so wounded,” Getō faux-whined, hiding his face against Gojō-sensei’s throat. “Truly, you’re breaking my heart!”

Gojō-sensei scrutinized Yūta thoughtfully and whatever he found in his expression had his own features soften further. He smiled fondly, first at him, then at his boyfriend as he let him slip into his arm, legs parting, and rubbed over his back.

“But you’re tolerable,” Yūta concluded, amused. Slowly, he heaved himself to his feet and stretched his arms, bones popping. “As long as you make sensei happy.” *And treat Maki-san well.*

Yūta didn’t wait long enough for a reply and started to jog over toward Maki-san, who was sitting now but still in the wreckage, and Mai who was talking next to her.

It wasn’t so bad even if Getō was doing most of the things that he did for Gojō-sensei’s sake. After all, Yuta himself would do *anything* for his friends. Fushiguro was working hard for his sister. Maki-san’s goal revolved around Mai’s happiness.

They all kept moving forward because of love, no matter in what form.

Maki-san glanced at him knowingly when she noticed him approach. “Made your escape, huh?”

She looked more exhausted than anything else but there was a smile playing on her lips, small and sincere, and determination etched into her face. Yūta took it all in, absent-mindedly noticed how Mai’s gaze flitted from the burn scars stretched over Maki-san’s face to her smile, finally settling on the latter, and huffed out a laugh. “They are awful.”

“*Disgusting*, you mean.”

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Megumi didn't dream of melting snow and the fading echoes of aggravating laughter anymore.

He still dreamed of gentle eyes turning cold and apathetic.

He still dreamed of a heart thrashing at his feet like a fish out of water.

He still dreamed of an eye rolling next to a deadly still body, frantically gazing around.

He still dreamed of a shadow haunting him, repeating again and again and again, *What's your name?*

And sometimes, he dreamed of dragons and gods shattered into mortality and invisible barriers pushing him back.

Every so often, like the past two nights, the shadows of his dreams - *nightmares* - made it impossible to sleep. To *want* to sleep. More often than not, Ieiri-san could be wheedled into handing him some sleeping pills, though, as long as that didn't turn into a habit.

At such a late hour, with tranquility settled heavily over the school and shadows creeping into every nook and crack and lapping greedily at his feet, he hadn't expected to run into *someone* other than the overworked doctor.

Megumi barely suppressed a surprised gasp, heart hammering against his ribcage.

Getō Suguru was sprawled over Ieiri-san's office table, several files and small medicine packages strewn around him and littered on the floor.

When the door creaked as soon as it slid out of Megumi's hold, Getō shot up with a start. Megumi's attention zeroed in on the stitches peeking out from behind several loose strands that were falling into his forehead – they were glimmering in a startling red glow. As if they had bled not so long ago. Or perhaps they were just irritated?

Yet, what had Megumi's pulse skidding out of rhythm was the *gaze*.

Even without the dim moonlight catching in the man's eyes, Megumi could see it clearly – he always could in the dark: They were glazed over, a wild, frenzied glint to them, and lingered a little above Megumi's head. Focused on him, but not *him*. Any trace of sleepiness that Megumi saw earlier, between the split-second of Getō startling awake and noticing him, was wiped blank from his expression, leaving his face unnervingly shuttered.

In the stuffy air of the office, Megumi picked up a bitingly bitter stench. Only faintly, at first, but it grew stronger with each passing, painfully loud heartbeat until he could *taste* it burning on his own tongue and clinging acidly to his gums – cursed energy so thick and heavy that it threatened to choke you.

This wasn't the first time.

Getō Suguru, former Special Grade Sorcerer, once part of The Strongest Duo – in moments like these, Megumi *understood*.

Despite his instincts protesting, Megumi took a deliberate step into the room. Getō jerked, blinked, frowning, and all of a sudden, whatever haze had been cloying around him dissipated as if it had never been there.

Megumi knew better, though.

“You...” Getō paused, clearing his throat, though his voice still came out raspy and clunky, “You’re not Shōko.”

“I doubt you were seeing Ieiri-san just now,” Megumi said drily, evidently catching the man off-guard.

There was a hunch hidden away in a far corner of Megumi’s mind. He had been neglecting it ever since Shibuya.

It had been easy to do so, then. A lot of things had happened around him at the tailend of the Shibuya Incident and its aftermath. Things that had been more urgent and important and thus, many worries pulled at him incessantly, leaving no time nor energy to waste on ghosts.

But *now*, it was becoming harder to ignore how, with each passing day since Gojō-sensei’s return, that hunch kept nudging more and more persistently against his awareness akin to a puppy clumsily pawing at his pants in demand of attention.

All because of Getō Suguru.

Many things were happening because of this man.

Often, just like earlier, Getō would look at Megumi as if he was seeing *someone else* in his stead, with a hatred so palpable that Megumi would taste, foul and acrid, it even afterward. The realization had been sitting uncomfortably underneath his skin for too long, like tiny pins lodged into the walls of his flesh, scratching at them unexpectedly whenever jostled.

It was driving him mad.

Getō propped his elbow on a small stack of papers and rested his head on his palm as he regarded Megumi thoughtfully. Megumi let him, remaining still. It was uncomfortable to be scrutinized like that – with so much piercing attention – but he had grown up with the *Six Eyes* on him; nothing else could compare.

Eventually, Getō just sighed and chose to ignore his remark. “What are you doing here?”

Megumi scowled. “What are *you* doing here?”

This late and *alone*.

He looked awful, to put it mildly. His hair was a complete mess, the bun on the back of his head loose, strands coming undone in a disarray. He was clearly exhausted, Megumi bet that there were dark rings underneath his eyes. And he kept rubbing his forefinger over his stitches like one would absentmindedly while thinking, but his motions were a little too harsh for it to be a subconscious action. Were they bothering him?

Megumi’s heart squeezed painfully.

“Is it that parasite?” he chanced a guess as chilly foreboding churned in his guts. “You can’t control him?”

There hadn’t been any relapses since that day when Getō had staggered out of the infirmary with his forehead and face caked in blood and Gojō-sensei’s hands all over him, frantically making sure that he was alright. At least, none that *Megumi* had been privy to. Considering that Getō still

regularly visited Ieiri-san, he definitely wasn't fine, and – as much as it annoyed him to admit – Megumi wouldn't put it past Gojō-sensei to hide something like that. Either for his boyfriend's non-existent integrity or simply because he didn't want anyone to fuss over him or express doubt over leaving him and Getō alone with each other.

Gojō-sensei was an idiot like that. Always taking care of everything and everyone but refusing to be worried over himself.

*Well, by most people*, his mind reminded him unhelpfully.

Getō's mouth twisted into a thin, downward crooked line. "Am *I* not sitting in front of you?"

"Doesn't have to mean much."

"It's none of your business either way, brat."

"Considering that Kenjaku has it out for Gojō-sensei," Megumi hissed, words thoughtlessly slipping through his gritted teeth, "it very much is." He immediately regretted saying that out aloud.

"Oh?" Getō smirked, all sharp edges and taunting curves. "*Worried* for Satoru? How cute."

*Ugh*. He crossed his arms over his chest, grateful that it was dark enough that the heat crawling up his neck wouldn't be noticed, and huffed.

"He doesn't like that, you know?" Getō made a vague hand gesture toward him. "Being fussed over. By his students, no less."

As if Megumi wasn't aware. "He lets *you*, though."

In the back of his mind, he could hear Kugisaki cackle at his sour tone, her accursed words from the day before - while she was trying to force an ugly lettuce-cap on him - echoing through his ears. *Fushiguro, we really need to talk about your stepdad issues!*

He shuddered.

Letting Itadori and Kugisaki push him into telling them how he knew Gojō-sensei so well had been the worst mistake of his life. But he couldn't have expected those two to be so obtuse about this... *Er, no*. He should have. Regardless, he didn't understand why those two enjoyed torturing him with this nonsense. Gojō-sensei *wasn't* his father – the mere notion had him cringing inwardly. Unfortunately, there was no apt description for what exactly that man was to him, though. A caretaker? A guardian? A mentor? An insufferable annoyance, *that* was for sure.

Megumi didn't believe that their relationship needed labelling.

Besides, who would want fucking *Getō* as their dad, anyway?

"And *I* let *him*," Getō drawled, snapping Megumi out of his silent fuming. "That's different." Before Megumi could reiterate, mouth already hanging open, Getō added too casually, "It's good that he has people looking out for him. Just don't make him feel *weak*. He can handle himself fine even now."

Was that *advice*? Gross.

"I know how to handle him," he grumbled, though didn't sound even half as irritated as he would

have liked.

Getō's gaze flashed with amusement which had Megumi bristling. "Whatever. So, what do you need? Shōko's not back yet."

Obviously. Was he waiting for her too? Why hadn't she returned yet? What had happened at headquarters that was so urgent?

"Nothing." Megumi was about to turn around and leave, but... He paused mid-turn, tilting his head to look at Getō sideways. "Why do you hate me so much?"

Heavy silence fell over them.

Getō lowered his gaze toward where his fingers were drumming over the surface of the table. For a second, Megumi wondered if he shouldn't have asked. No matter what Itadori and Kugisaki claimed, whether Getō hated him or not *didn't* bother him. He was merely curious. Although, he probably could get his answers elsewhere - Gojō-sensei had never denied him when he had asked outright.

With a quiet sigh Getō conceded, "I don't hate you."

Of course. Megumi wasn't an idiot.

He was well aware of the fact that he had never done anything to this guy - trying to attack him that first day when he had appeared on school grounds with Gojō-sensei tucked against him notwithstanding. It made no sense for Getō to harbor such vicious resentment for *him*, and even less to keep it contained so well.

But there were people related to Megumi by blood with a history in the jujutsu world, weren't there? Though, he had met some of them - he wasn't the carbon copy of any of the current Zen'in family members still alive.

*'Not Zen'in, huh? Good for you.'*

His hunch quivered unnervingly.

The uncertainty was driving him crazy.

Getō straightened up and leaned back, his chair squeaking under the sudden weight. "It's not my place to tell you. You should ask Satoru if it bothers you that much. You have a guess, don't you?"

"Ask me what?"

Megumi whirled around too fast to cover up his shock.

Gojō-sensei turned on the light as he strolled into the room, blinding Megumi momentarily. Megumi stumbled aside, pinching the bridge of his nose, and blinked a few times until the dark dots stopped dancing in his vision. When he looked up, Gojō-sensei was placing a paper cup in front of Getō, another one still clutched to his own chest. His shades were resting on top of his head, Megumi noted when his focused shifted to him, one eyebrow cocked curiously.

Right. The question.

Megumi glanced toward Getō who had his face pressed against Gojō-sensei's arm, long dark hair hiding his expression, and wasn't paying him any attention anymore.



“It’s nothing,” he mumbled tiredly. Curious as he was - there was also dread sitting heavy like a rock in his chest.

After all, Megumi wasn’t an idiot. He *had* his guesses.

And he would much rather have this eventual conversation without an audience.

Gojō-sensei frowned dubiously at him. “You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“If you say so.” He clearly didn’t believe him. “What are you doing up, anyway?” he asked as he took a sip from his cup, gaze flitting down toward Getō, fondly, before refocusing on him. “Can’t sleep?”

Megumi grimaced. How the fuck did he know?

Mischief danced around Gojō-sensei’s mouth, poorly hidden behind his drink. “Did you try warm milk? That always helped you!”

Getō snorted at that.

“Shut up!” Megumi hissed as he rubbed over his heating neck. “Why are you so insufferable?!”

“I’m just trying to help!”

“I really hate you,” Megumi huffed half-heartedly.

Getō looked up from Gojō-sensei’s arm and grinned sharply. “My, my, Fushiguro, you’re a tsundere, huh?”

He hated them *both*.

“You know, Satoru, he just told me-”

“I’m leaving!” Megumi shouted, throwing up his arms in exasperation. Their laughter followed him as he whirled toward the door, setting his blood on fire. *Assholes*.

“Wait, wait!” Gojō-sensei called after him, *still* chuckling. “Actually, I wanted to talk to you anyway!”

*Sure*. “I’m not interested in any-”

“We may have a lead on Tsumiki.”

Megumi froze in the doorway.

“I just confirmed with Shōko. Someone got Gakuganji and quite a number of other sorcerers badly - the description fits Tsumiki.” After a short pause, he added, “Suguru’s scouring the whole area. If she’s still nearby, it shouldn’t take too long.”

*Oh*. Megumi swallowed around the sudden lump pressing into his throat, buried his hands in his pockets, and wondered aloud, “What are you going to do?”

“Me? I’m going to visit headquarters.”

Shocked, Megumi turned on his heel, gaping at Gojō-sensei. “*Now?*”

He was leaning against the back of Getō’s chair, his cup resting next to Getō’s untouched one and his arms draped over Getō’s chest, their faces *way* too close, and smiled. “In a bit, yeah. It’s overdue.”

It was. He had been itching to take action ever since coming back, hadn’t he?

“So, you’ll go over. With *him*.” He nodded toward Getō.

“Obviously,” the guy huffed without glancing up, too busy playing with Gojō-sensei’s fingers.

That was bound to be... something. “And then, what?”

“We’ll see,” sensei hummed. “Depends on how cooperative the geezers will be.”

Megumi squinted at him. There was no way that he didn’t have some semblance of a plan.

“But I wonder.” Gojō-sensei averted his gaze, looking down to where Getō was pressing his lips against sensei’s knuckles. *Ugh*. “What would you do if I killed them?”

Megumi blinked, taken aback. He was about to reply but... Gojō-sensei sounded so *serious*. Troubled, perhaps. As if he had agonized over this for a while... Carefully, Megumi said, “I’d say that you don’t kill without good reason.”

Gojō Satoru was *crazy*.

But the only human Megumi knew of whom he had killed was cozying up next to him right now. *And* was - had been? - a fanatical, genocidal maniac. Maybe there were things that Megumi wasn’t privy to about the man’s life, but he was fairly confident that he understood Gojō-sensei’s nature well.

He didn’t kill needlessly. He didn’t *enjoy* killing.

Frankly speaking, considering all the shit that the higher-ups had already pulled, Megumi was astonished that Gojō-sensei hadn’t already eradicated them.

Gojō-sensei shared a quiet, private glance with Getō. Something... not quite sad, but teetering on the line glimmered in his features, dimming his smile. “Is that so...”

“Whatever you do,” Megumi said, felt the *need* to say, not liking Gojō-sensei’s tone, “I’m sure it can’t be *that* awful.”

Gojō-sensei’s eyes fluttered up to him, brimming with contentment. “Aw, so much trust from you, Megumi!” he crooned.

“You always know how to ruin the mood,” Megumi sighed.

“Maybe you’re just too sensitive,” Getō suggested unkindly. “Certainly, very grumpy.”

Megumi *refused* to stick out his tongue. “Do you want us to come along?”

“No, no.” Consideringly, Gojō-sensei added, “Well, not *all* of you? I’d rather you go to Tsumiki. Take Nobara and Yūji with you.”

“I think I might have found her,” Getō chimed in, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. “Maybe?”

Anticipation bubbled in Megumi's chest, accelerating his heart. That *was* fast.

"Go, wake the other two," Gojō-sensei instructed with a wave of his hand. "I'll text you the location."

Megumi didn't need to be told twice. With a glare toward Getō, he warned, "You better have his back."

The guy had the nerve to roll his eyes. "Yes, mom."

Gojō-sensei glanced between them. "You two are getting along better!"

*Seriously.*

Megumi shook his head as he dashed out of the room, anxiety and excitement warring in the pit of his stomach.

He wasn't really worried about Gojō-sensei, fully aware that even if something were to go wrong, Getō would handle it. Though Getō didn't need to know that lest he get ideas.

## Chapter End Notes

- So. First of all - this was a hard chapter to write, lmao. The reason it took me so long was that I couldn't decide how to do it: whether to give a few of the kids a pov or only Megumi. Initially, I wrote a Megumi chapter that was almost done at 5k words before my brain suddenly decided that it hated it all and I started from scratch. Which brought about the current version. That got way too long. I was tempted to take out Yuta's part to make it shorter and just leave the trio but... since it was already that long, a little bit more wouldn't hurt 🤔 (Plus, I just liked that specific image of stsg's intimacy, lol.)

- I don't have much to say about the chapter itself. I just thought that it would be nice to wrap it all up with the kids and their different thoughts/perceptions of/feelings on Geto and stsg (stsg were just there to be mushy, apparently...). Aside from that, I wanted to tease some things, lol - like the Tsumiki stuff, the Toji bit (initial chapter actually had that conversation between Megumi and Gojo... maybe another time!), Gojo stepping back into focus (does he actually have a plan? Who knows, but he's sick of sitting around :p), the Mai-Maki bit (since the Zen'in massacre didn't happen in this timeline but Maki's issue still exists. The PR bit was just a thought Geto had because it did cause Gojo to lose his cursed energy for a while - so, maybe there is a way to make someone lose theirs permanently? ͇(˘͇)͇), Yuji's ~execution~ and Sukuna being a nuisance (he can't take control just yet but it's harder for Yuji to fully suppress him; also, I simply wanted some Sukuna in here, lmao) - and Nobara's just vibing

(also: why Prague? No real reason - someone was talking about their fav food over there while I was working on that part, lol).

\_ I wonder if the chapter counts as fluff, though Lol, I definitely added up making stsg very... sugary throughout the fic. But. They deserve good things? The world around them has been and still is shitty enough for lots of sad stuff, anyway :p

- In my mind, Nobara's new eyepatch is designed after this:  
<https://www.pinterest.de/pin/823666219320870830/>

- I've mentioned this before but: While I don't make any promises, I'll leave the possibility of adding OSs to this verse open! The story already has a prequel, so it's not impossible. Three things that I have specifically in mind would be 1) Hakari and Kirara meeting Geto (I love them, although I'd like to see a bit more of them in the manga before writing them, lmao), 2) A Maki&stsg focused chapter with some Mai sprinkled in (her pov didn't quite fit into here, but. I'd love to give her a OS at some point), and 3) that Megumi&Gojo conversation. Let's see, it won't be for a while since I've got busy months ahead of me and other wips to focus on.

- Lastly, I want to thank everyone who has been reading this fic and supported it either through kudos, comments and/or bookmarks! Tbh, I never expected this fic to get as much attention as it did, it still astonishes me sometimes. But I'm happy that so many of you have enjoyed it and I sincerely hope that this last chapter was satisfying for you, as well! I've agonized over it a lot and personally, I'm content with the outcome. Anyway, thanks, once again! ♥

## End Notes

And as always, if you want to chat, you can find me on tumblr: [tozhan](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!